

interzone

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Chris Beckett: The Gates of Eden

plus new stories by

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Persistent illusions and turbid waters

'The future is on its way ... the future always wins' asserts *Arc 1.1*, the first issue of a 'new digital magazine of the future' from the publishers of *New Scientist*. Albert Einstein would not have agreed: 'the distinction between past, present and future,' he told us, 'is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.' Einstein may have been unconvinced by the core message but would surely have been impressed by the ability of *Arc*'s editorial team to have their cake and eat it.

On one hand we're told 'science is not and never was the point of science fiction' and that 'gadgets are never the point of the future'. But the magazine's competition, run in partnership with Intel, will be 'soliciting near-future stories with a heavy technological emphasis'. And there are a significant number of references to science and technology on the *Behind the Scenes* page previewing the stories and articles.

I'm all for a dash of paradox and a soupçon of ambiguity: there are many great sf tales about technologically driven futures and – as contributor Adam Roberts points out – many powerful and much loved stories concerned with transcendence.

Furthermore, *Arc 1.1* has an illustrious line up of contributors – Alastair Reynolds, M. John Harrison, China Miéville, Bruce Sterling and Margaret Atwood – all writers concerned with the human psychology, emotion and experience. So it shouldn't be dull.

But the marketing copy depresses me. It assumes cutting edge writing should address the future and it carries an embedded and unchallenged acceptance of the notion of progress. Editor Simon Ings, a writer I have admired for years, tells us: 'The future is driven by our restless appetite for change.'

If anything, there's a restless appetite for nostalgia and escapism. The future might not win, it could be stillborn.

Ings' position is a narrow one to adopt at a time of social, political and psychological upheaval.

We need fiction that embraces some futures and mounts a gutsy resistance to others; fiction that dives into the turbid waters of tomorrow and wades into the murky waters of a difficult present; fiction that explores in full the ambiguities and complexities of the human condition.

Andy Hedgecock

ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD



As Others See Us. TV presenter Fern Britton opined that 'I think *Doctor Who* is the most dreary thing [...] I tried to watch *Star Wars* three times but I've never got past the first 12 minutes as I've always fallen asleep. / I hate sci-fi as it's not real and all these people who are fans think it's real and it's some sort of religion to them.' (BBC2 *Room 101*.)

Clive Barker was hospitalised in January 'thanks to a nearly fatal case of Toxic Shock brought on by a visit to my dentist. Apparently this is not uncommon. In my case the dental work unloaded such a spillage of poisonous bacteria into my blood that my whole system crashed, putting me into a coma. I spent several days in Intensive Care, with a machine breathing for me.' He emerged twenty pounds lighter.

Magazine Scene. *Arc*, a 'digital magazine about the future' from the *New Scientist* stable, launched in February in various

e-formats plus a 'collectible print edition' at an eye-watering \$29.95 (152pp trade paperback).

Russell T. Davies generalises wildly: 'Magic and science fiction are never combined.' (*Guardian*.)

Awards. *Bram Stoker* (horror) Life Achievement: Rick Hautala, Joe R. Lansdale. • *Crawford* (fantasy): Genevieve Valentine, *Mechanique: A Tale of the Circus Tresaulti* (2011). • *Kitschies*, best novel: Patrick Ness & Siobhan Dowd, *A Monster Calls*. • *SFWA Grand Master*: Connie Willis.

William Gibson retains the power to surprise journalists: 'For a science-fiction novelist, William Gibson is oddly reluctant to be called a prophet.' (*The Week*.)

The Weakest Link. Host: 'Which writer's birthday is commemorated on Pooh Day?' Contestant: 'Shakespeare.' (ITV *The Chase*)

Nick Park was 'flattered' by numerous UK newspaper cartoons – especially in the *Times* – which liken his hapless inventor Wallace (of Wallace & Gromit fame) to the allegedly hapless Labour leader Ed Miliband. But Aardman Animations staff worry that Wallace's public image may be damaged by these comparisons: 'You have to protect the brand.' Meanwhile, 'A spokesman for Mr Miliband declined to comment.' (*Independent*.)

As Others See Us II. A *Guardian* piece on ebooks makes the pecking order clear: 'Kindle-owning bibliophiles are furtive beasts. Their shelves still boast classics and Booker winners. But inside that plastic case, other things lurk. Sci-fi and self-help. Even paranormal romance, where vampires seduce virgins and elves bonk trolls.' In short, 'The ebook world is driven by so-called genre fiction, categories such as horror or romance. It's not future classics that push digital sales, but more downmarket fare. No cliché is left unturned, no adjective underplayed.' No sneer unsneered.

Refuseniks. A list – excluding the living – of those who declined UK honours 1951–1999 was released after a BBC Freedom of Information Act request. Names of genre interest: Roald Dahl (OBE 1986), C.S. Forester (CBE 1953), Robert Graves (CBE

1957, CH 1984), Alfred Hitchcock (CBE 1962), Aldous Huxley (knighthood 1959), C.S. Lewis (CBE 1952) and J.B. Priestley (life peerage 1965, CH 1969). Not listed, as post-1999: J.G. Ballard, who refused a CBE in 2003.

Strange Bedfellows. 'Harry Potter and Viagra have more in common than you may imagine. They came to market within a year of each other in the late 1990s; they enjoyed enormous success; and what was a boon for the companies that sold them could turn into a bane as their popularity fades and rivals emerge.' (*Financial Times*.)

Richard Garriot aka Lord British, videogame developer and 2008 space tourist at a cost of \$30m, shot an eight-minute movie called *Apogee of Fear* on the International Space Station – the first sf film made in space – which for unclear reasons NASA wouldn't let him release. January news reports of the ban led to a rethink: 'NASA is working with Richard Garriott to facilitate the video's release.' (*Wired*.) One imagines a high-level NASA committee demanding some less ominous title, such as *Apogee of Strong Arguments for Increased Agency Funding*.

Thog's Masterclass. *Socratic Dept.* 'The question hung there like an invisible cloud of flatulence.' (Neal Stephenson, *Reamde*, 2011) • *Dept of Nautical Detail.* 'Stan and Olivia ate noodles together and then proceeded by taxi to Sembawang Wharves, where Olivia boarded an American destroyer in a long raincoat with the hood up while carrying a large umbrella.' (*Ibid*) • *Dept of Visible Poverty.* 'Neela looked at him, her face destitute.' (Dani & Eytan Kollin, *The Unincorporated Man*, 2009) • *Mirth of No Human Shape Dept.* 'Gibbous laughter flicked at the edges of his consciousness.' (Barbara Hambly, *The Witches of Wenshar*, 1987) • *Dept of Central Casting.* 'General Vigo, a tall, snowy-haired albino from Urinal, fourth satellite moon of Saturn' ... 'Morganus Thaeller, the Chief Control Commissioner of Troublesome Planets and Asteroids' ... 'Regina Zelda, loveliest and most delicately nurtured of all the inhabitants of the Four Worlds' ... 'Zelda, her soft comely breasts rising and falling rapidly beneath their torn flimsy coverings, stood beside him, her eyes alight with tenderness.' ... 'Carlyon, like all Martians, a brown-skinned giant of six hectares high' ('Bengo Mistral', *Pirates of Cerebus*, 1953)

R.I.P.

Mark Bourne (1961–2012), US author of several short stories and planetarium presentations (two *Trek*-themed) died on 25 February; he was 50.

Robert E. Briney (1933–2011), one of the founding partners of the important sf small press Advent: Publishers, died in November.

Lou Cameron (1924–2010), US comics artist and author of over 300 novels – mostly Westerns – whose sf ventures included *The Spy with the Blue Kazoo* (1967 as by Dagmar) and *Cybernia* (1972), is now confirmed as having died on 25 November 2010 aged 86.

Richard Carpenter (1933–2012), UK screenwriter and author whose TV series creations included *Catweazle* (1970–1971) and *The Ghosts of Motley Hall* (1976–1978 – both of which he novelised – died on 26 February.

John Christopher (Sam Youd, 1922–2012), noted UK author of both adult and YA sf, died on 3 February after long illness; he was 89. Active in fandom in the 1930s, he began publishing with a 1941 *Weird Tales* poem and a 1949 *Astounding* story; the best-known of his strong adult disaster novels is *The Death of Grass* (1956, aka *No Blade of Grass*, under which title it was filmed); others include *The World in Winter* and *A Wrinkle in the Skin*. For younger readers, the part-televised *Tripods* sequence (1967–1968) and the *Prince in Waiting* trilogy (1970–1972) are especially memorable.

Bob Franklin, UK fan in the 1960s whose one published sf story was 'Cinnabar Balloon Tautology' (March 1970 *New Worlds*), died on 22 February.

Reginald Hill (1936–2012), popular UK author of the Dalziel and Pascoe detections – of which *One Small Step* (1990) is sf set on the Moon – died on 12 January aged 75. As Dick Morland he wrote the sf dystopias *Heart Clock* (1973) and *Albion! Albion!* (1974).

Howard Hopkins (1961–2012), US author of graphic novels and the 'Chloe Files' urban fantasy/horror series, died

from a heart attack on 12 January; he was 50.

Phyllis MacLennan (1920–2012), author of several short sf stories 1963–1980 and the novel *Turned Loose on Irdra* (1970), died on 8 January aged 91.

Sir Simon Marsden (1948–2012), UK photographer specialising in ruins, graveyards and general eeriness, died on 22 January aged 63. His books include the Poe selection *Visions of Poe* (1988), the supernatural anthology *The Twilight Hour* (2003) and *Vampires: The Twilight World* (2011).

Ardath Mayhar (1930–2012), long-time US author active since the 1940s and in sf since 1973, died on 1 February aged 81. Her first science-fantasy novel was *How the Gods Wove in Kyrannon* (1979); many more followed, plus two story collections; she was honoured by SFWA as Author Emeritus in 2008.

Bob Sabella (1948–2011), long-time US fan and author of *Who Shaped Science Fiction?* (2000), died on 3 December. He was 63.

Martin Sherwood (1942–2011), UK author of the sf novels *Survival* (1975) and *Maxwell's Demon* (1976), died on 10 May 2011 aged 69.

Mike White, UK comics artist best known for *Roy of the Rovers*, died on 28 or 29 January. Genre work included the dystopian *Kids Rule OK for Action* (scripted by Jack Adrian) and various 2000 AD 'Future Shocks' and 'Time Twisters' features (many, among them the Abelard Snazz tales, scripted by Alan Moore).



twember



STEVE RASNIC TEM

WILL OBSERVED THROUGH THE KITCHEN WINDOW OF HIS PARENTS' farmhouse as the towering escarpment, its many strata glittering relative to their contents, moved inescapably through the fields several hundred yards away. He held his breath as it passed over and through fences, barns, tractors, and an abandoned house long shed of paint. Its trespass was apparently without effect, although some of the objects in its wake had appeared to tremble ever so slightly, shining as if washed in a recent, cleansing rain.

"It might be beautiful," his mother said beside him, her palsy magnified by the exertion of standing, "if it weren't so frightening."

"You're pushing yourself." He helped her into one of the old ladder-back kitchen chairs. "You're going to make yourself sick."

"A body needs to see what she's up against." She closed her eyes.

He got back to the window in time to see a single tree in the escarpment's wake sway, shake, and fall over. Between the long spells of disabling interference he had heard television commentators relate how, other than the symptomatic "cosmetic" impact on climate, sometimes nearby objects *were* affected, possibly even destroyed, when touched by the escarpments, or the walls, or the roaming cliffs – whatever you cared to call the phenomena. These effects were still poorly understood, and "under investigation" and there had been "no official conclusions." Will wondered if there ever would be, but no one would ever again be able to convince him that the consequences of these massive, beautiful, and strange escarpments as they journeyed across the world were merely cosmetic.



His mother insisted that the television be kept on, even late at night, and even though it was no better than a white noise machine most of the time. "We can't afford to miss anything important," she'd said. "It's like when there's a tornado coming – you keep your TV on."

"These aren't like tornadoes, Mom. They can't predict them."

"Well, maybe they'll at least figure out what they are, why they're here."

"They've talked about a hundred theories, two hundred. Time disruption, alien invasion, dimensional shifts at the earth's core. Why are tsunamis here? Does it matter? You still can't stop them." At least the constant static on the TV had helped him sleep better.

"They're getting closer." Tracy had come up behind him. There was a time when she would have put her arms around him at this point, but that affectionate gesture didn't appear to be in his wife's repertoire anymore.

"Maybe. But it's not like they have intelligence," he said, not really wanting to continue their old argument, but unable to simply let it go.

"See how it changes course, just slightly?" she said. "And there's enough tilt from vertical I'm *sure* that can't just be an optical illusion. It leans toward occupied areas. I've been watching this one off and on all day, whenever it's visible, almost from the time it came out of the ground."

"They don't really come out of the ground." He tried to sound neutral, patient, but he doubted he was succeeding. "They've said it just looks that way. They're forming from the ground up, that's all."

"We don't know that much about them. No one does," she snapped.

"It's not like it's some predator surfacing, like a shark or a snake, prowling for victims." He was unable to soften the tone of his voice.

"You don't know that for sure."

Will watched as the escarpment either flowed out of visual range or dematerialized, it was hard to tell. "No. I guess I don't."

"Some of the people around here are saying that those things sense where there are people living, that they're drawn there, like sharks to bait. They say they learn."

"I don't know." He didn't want to talk about it anymore. "I hope not." Of course she was entitled to her opinion, and it wasn't that he knew any more than she did. But they used to know how to disagree.

He could hear his father stirring in the bedroom. The old man shuffled out, his eyes wet, unfocused. The way he moved past, Will wasn't sure if he even knew they were there. His father gazed out the window, and not for the first time Will wondered what exactly he was seeing. In the hazy distance another escarpment seemed to be making its appearance, but it might simply be the dust blown up from the ground, meeting the low-lying, streaked clouds. Then his father said "chugchug-chugchugchug," and made a whooh whoohing sound, like a train. Then he made his way on out to the porch.

In his bedroom, Jeff began to whimper. Tracy went in to check on him. Will knew he should join her there – he'd barely looked at his son in days, except to say goodnight after the boy was already asleep – but considering how awkward it would be

with the three of them he instead grabbed the keys to his dad's pickup and went out looking for the place where the escarpment had passed through and touched that tree.

Will had grown up here in eastern Colorado, gone to school, helped his parents out on the farm. It really hadn't changed that much over the decades, until recently, with that confusion of seasons that frequently followed the passage of escarpments through a region. The actual temperatures might vary only a few degrees from the norm, but the accompanying visual clues were often deceptive and disorienting. Stretches of this past summer had felt almost wintery, what with reduced sunlight, a deadening of plant color, and even the ghostly manifestation of a kind of faux snow which disintegrated into a shower of minute light-reflecting particles when touched.

Those suffering from seasonal affective disorder had had no summer reprieve this year. He'd heard stories that a few of the more sensitive victims had taken to their beds for most of the entire year. Colorado had a reputation for unpredictable weather, but these outbreaks, these "invasions" as some people called them, had taken this tendency toward meteorological unreliability to a new extreme.

Now it was, or at least should have been, September, with autumn on the way but still a few pretty hot days, but there were – or at least there appeared to be – almost no leaves on the trees, and no indications that there ever had been, and a gray-white sky had developed over the past few weeks, an immense amorphous shroud hanging just above the tops of the trees, as if the entire world had gone into storage. Dead of winter, or so he would have thought, if he'd actually lost track of the weeks, which he dare not do. He studied the calendar at least once a day and tried to make what he saw outside conform with memories of seasons past, as if he might will a return to normalcy.

Thankfully there had been few signs as yet of that fake snow. The official word was that the snow-like manifestation was harmless for incidental contact, and safe for children. Will wasn't yet convinced – the very existence of it gave him the creeps, thinking that some sort of metaphysical infection might have infiltrated the very atomic structure of the world, and haunted it.

"Twember," was what his mother called this new mixing of the seasons. "It's all betwixt and between. Pretty soon we're going to have just this one season. It won't matter when you plant, or what, it's all going to look like it died."

He thought he was probably in the correct vicinity now. Parts of the ground had this vaguely rubbed, not quite polished appearance, as if the path had been heated and ever-so-slightly glazed by the friction of the escarpment's passing. The air was charged – it seemed to push back, making his skin tingle and his hair stir. A small tree slightly to one side of the path had been bent the opposite way, several of its branches fresh and shiny as Spring, as if they had been gently renewed, lovingly washed, but the rest with that flat, dead look he'd come to hate.

Spotting a patch of glitter on the ground, Will pulled off onto the shoulder and got out of the truck. As he walked closer he could see how here and there sprays of the shiny stuff must have spewed out of the passing escarpment, suggesting contents escaping under pressure, like plumes of steam. He dropped to one knee and examined the spot: a mix of old coins, buttons,

bits of glass, small metal figures, toys, vacation mementos, souvenirs, suggesting the random debris left in the bottom of the miscellanea drawer after the good stuff has been packed away for some major household move – the stuff you threw in the trash or left behind for the next tenants.

The strong scent of persimmons permeated the air. The funny thing was, he had no idea how he knew this. Will didn't think he'd ever seen one, much less smelled it. Was it a flower, or a fruit?

For a few minutes he thought there were no other signs of the escarpment's passing, but then he began to notice things. A reflection a few yards away turned out to be an antique oil lamp. He supposed it was remotely possible such a thing could have been lost or discarded and still remain relatively intact, but this lamp was pristine, with at least an inch of oil still in its reservoir. And a few feet beyond were a pair of women's shoes, covered in white satin, delicate and expensive-looking, set upright on the pale dust as if the owner had stepped out of them but moments before, racing for the party she could not afford to miss.

The old house had been abandoned sometime in the seventies, the structure variously adapted since then to store equipment, hay, even as a makeshift shelter for a small herd of goats. From the outside it looked very much the same, and Will might have passed it by, but then he saw the ornate bedpost through one of the broken windows, and the look of fresh blue paint over part of one exterior wall, and knew that something had occurred here out of the ordinary.

The house hadn't had a door in a decade or more, and still did not, but the framing around the door opening appeared almost new, and was of metal – which it had never been – attached to a ragged border of brick which had incongruously blended in to the edges of the original wood-framed wall. Two enormous, shiny brass hinges stood out from this frame like the flags of some new, insurgent government. The effect was as if a door were about to materialize, or else had almost completed its disappearance.

Once he was past the door frame, the small abandoned house appeared as he might normally expect. Islands of dirt, drifted in through the opening or blown through the missing windows, looked to have eaten through the floorboards, some sprouting prairie grass and gray aster. There were also the scat of some wild animal or other, probably fox or coyote, small pieces of old hay from back when the building had been used for feed storage, and a variety of vulgar graffiti on the ruined walls, none of it appearing to be of recent vintage.

A short hallway led from this front room into the back of the house, and as he passed through Will began to notice a more remarkable sort of misalignment, a clear discrepancy between what was and what should have been.

A broken piece of shelf hung on the wall approximately mid-way through the brief hallway. It had a couple of small objects on it. On closer inspection he saw that it wasn't broken at all – the edges of the wood actually appeared finely frayed, the threads of what was alternating with the threads of what was not. Along the frayed edge lay approximately one third of an old daguerreotype – although not at all old, it seemed. Shiny-new, glass sealed around the intact edges with rolled copper,

laid inside a wood and leather case. A large portion of the entire package bitten off, missing, not torn exactly, or broken, for the missing bite of it too was delicately, wispily frayed, glass fibers floating into empty air as if pulled away. The image under the glass was of a newly-married couple in Victorian-style clothing, their expressions like those under duress: the bride straining out a thin smile, the groom stiffly erect, as if his neck were braced.

A piece of pale gauze covered the opening at the end of the short hall. Now lifting on a cool breeze, the gauze slapped the walls on both sides, the ceiling. Will stepped forward and gently pulled it aside, feeling like an intruder.

A four-poster bed sat diagonally in the ruined room, the incongruous scent of the perfumed linen still strong despite faint traces of an abandoned staleness and animal decay. The bed looked recently slept in, the covers just pulled back, the missing woman – he figured it was probably a woman – having stepped out for a moment. Peering closer, he found a long, copper-colored hair on the pillow. He picked it up gently, holding it like something precious against the fading afternoon light drifting lazily in through the broken window. He wanted to take it with him, but he didn't know exactly why, or how he could, or if he should. So he laid it carefully back down on the pillow, in its approximate original location.

Half a mirror torn lengthwise was propped against a wide gap in the outer wall. Beyond was simply more of the eastern Colorado plains, scrub grass and scattered stone, but somewhat smoother than normal, shinier, and Will surmised that the escarpment had exited the farm house at this point.

He found himself creeping up to the mirror, nervous to look inside. Will never looked at mirrors much, even under normal conditions. He wasn't that old – in his fifties still, and as far as he knew, the same person inside, thinking the same thoughts he'd had at seventeen, eighteen, twenty. But what he saw in the mirror had stopped matching the self-image in his brain some time long ago.

He stopped a couple of feet away, focusing on the ragged edge where the escarpment had cut through and obliterated the present, or the past. More of that floating raggedness, suggesting a kind of yearning for completion, for what was missing. His reluctance to find his reflection made him reel a bit. What if he looked down and it was himself as a teenager looking up, with obvious signs of disappointment on his face?

But it was himself, although perhaps a bit older, paler, as if the color were being leached out and eventually he would disappear. The problem with avoiding your image in the mirror was that when you finally did see it, it was a bit of a shock, really, because of how much you had changed. Who was this old man with his thoughts?

He left the abandoned house and strolled slowly toward the pickup, watching the ground, looking for additional leavings but finding nothing. The empty ground looked like it always did out here, as it probably did in any open, unsettled place, as if it were ageless, unfixed, and yet fundamentally unchangeable. Whatever might be done to it, it would always return to this.

He wanted to describe to Tracy what he'd seen here, but what, exactly, had he seen? Time had passed this way, and left some

things behind, then gone on its way. And the world was fundamentally unchanged. His mother might understand better, but Tracy was the one he wanted to tell, even though she might not hear him.

He felt the pressure change inside his ears, and he turned part of the way around, looking, but not seeing. Suddenly the world roared up behind him, passed him, and he shook.

He bent slightly backwards, looking up, terrified he might lose his balance, and having no idea of what the possible consequences might be. The moving escarpment towered high above him, shaking in and out of focus as it passed, and shaking him, seemingly shaking the ground, but clearly this wasn't a physical shaking, clearly this was no earthquake, but a violent vibration of the senses, and the consciousness behind them. Closing his eyes minimized the sensation, but he didn't want to miss anything, so other than a few involuntary blinks he kept them open. He turned his body around as best he could, as quickly, to get a better view.

He could make out the top of the escarpment, at least he could see that it did have a top, an edge indicating that it had stopped its vertical climb, but he could tell little more than that. As his eyes traveled further down he was able to focus on more detail, and taking a few steps back gave him a better perspective.

There were numerous more or less clearly defined strata, each in movement seemingly independent of the others, sometimes in an opposite flow from those adjacent, and sometimes the same but at a different speed. Like a multilayered roulette wheel, he thought, which seemed appropriate.

Trapped in most of these layers were visible figures – some of them blurred, but some of them so clear and vivid that when they were looking in his direction, as if from a wide window in the side of a building, he attempted to gain their attention by waving. None responded in any definitive way, although here and there the possibility that they might have seen him certainly seemed to be there.

The vast majority of these figures appeared to be ordinary people engaged in ordinary activities – fixing or eating dinner, housecleaning, working in offices, factories, on farms – but occasionally he'd see something indicating that an unusual event was occurring or had recently occurred. A man lying on his back, people gathered around, some attending to the fallen figure but most bearing witness. A couple being chased by a crowd. A woman in obvious anguish, screaming in a foreign language. A blurred figure in freefall from a tall building.

The settings for these dramas, suspenseful or otherwise, were most often sketchily drawn: some vague furniture, the outlines of a building, or not indicated at all. The figures sometimes acted their parts on a backdrop of floating abstractions. In a few cases, however, it was like looking out his front door – at random locations a tree branch or a roof eave actually penetrated the outer plane of the escarpment and hung there like a three-dimensional projection in the contemporary air.

It was like a gigantic three-dimensional time-line/cruise ship passing through the eastern Colorado plains, each level representing a different era. It was like a giant fault in time, shifting the temporal balance of the world in an attempt to rectify past mistakes. But there was no compelling reason to believe any of

these theories. It was an enormous, fracturing mystery traveling through the world.

And just as suddenly as it had appeared, becoming so dramatically *there* it sucked up all the available reality of its environment, it was gone, reduced to a series of windy, dust-filled eddies that dissipated within a few seconds. Will shakily examined himself with eyes and hands. Would he lose his mind the way his Jeff had?

IF THEY'D PULLED their son out of school when these storms first began he'd be okay right now. That's what they'd been called at first, "storms," because of their sudden evolution, and the occasional accompanying wind, and the original belief that they were an atmospheric phenomenon of some sort, an optical illusion much like sunlight making a rainbow when it passed through moisture-laden cloud, although they couldn't imagine why it was so detailed, or the mechanism of its projection. Tracy had wanted to pull Jeff out until the world better understood what all this was about, and a few other parents, a very few, had already done so. But Will couldn't see the reasoning. If there was a danger how would Jeff be any safer at home? These insubstantial moving walls came out of nowhere, impossible to predict, and as far as anyone knew they weren't harmful. There had been that case of the farmer in Texas, but he'd been old, and practically senile anyway, and it must have been a terrible shock when it passed through his barn.

Tracy inevitably blamed Will, because in Jeff's case it certainly hadn't been harmless, and then Will had compounded things by being late that day. Will was often late. He had always worked at being some sort of success, even though the right combination of jobs and investments had always eluded him. He'd been selling spas and real estate, filling in the gaps with various accounting and IT consulting. Too many clients, too many little puzzle pieces of time, everything overlapping slightly so that at times his life was multidimensional, unfocused, and he was always late to wherever he was scheduled to be.

He'd pulled up to the school twenty minutes late that day to pick up Jeff. Normally it wouldn't have mattered that much – Jeff liked hanging out in the school library using their computers. And if that's where he'd been he would have probably been okay. But that particular afternoon Jeff had decided to hang out on the playground shooting hoops until his dad came to pick him up. And that's where he'd been when the towering wall came through. One of the teachers who'd witnessed the event said later that the wall appeared so suddenly no one had time to move, and it ran over Jeff much like a runaway truck, looking scarily solid, seemingly obliterating everything in its path as it thundered across the concrete and asphalt.

Will had arrived just in time to see that rapidly moving wall vanishing into a dusty brown mist, bending gel-like, quickly losing resolution as it leaned precariously like some old building coming down in an earthquake, but silently – the roar and the shaking were entirely visual, the trauma entirely mental. He had raced into the last of its shimmering eddies and scooped his drooling boy off the ground.

Will drove the pickup back toward his parents' farm more slowly, and with more care than he had when he left. The ambi-

ent light of the day had dimmed only slightly, but the canopy of sky appeared even lower than before, only a hundred yards up or so. The landscape looked flattened, stretched out under the pressure of the low-hanging clouds. He could hear rumbles in the distance, and could see the brief glimmer of escarpments appearing, disappearing, surfacing, diving back into the world. Time escaping, time buried and sealed.

Another pickup approached on the narrow gravel road, identical, or almost identical to his. He held his breath, wondering how he would handle it if he encountered a younger or an older version of himself driving the same pickup on the road. Surely that would still be impossible, even during Twember? And if it did occur, might that not shatter the world?

The pickup slowed as it came up alongside him. He stared at the driver. Because it was Lana Sumpter, much as she'd been when she was seventeen years old – her face so new, fresh, and shiny with a soft-lipped smile cradling her words. "Will? Will Cotton? Is that you?"

Both trucks stopped, his head still shook. "I, I'm not sure," he replied. "Probably not the same one. Lana, are any of us the same one?" He was babbling, just like he used to with her. He'd loved her so much his bones used to ache, making his skin seem ill-fitting. He'd never loved anyone that much before, or since.

Lana gazed at him, cheeks slightly flushed. The dark blue of the truck appeared to fade, to lighten, to whiten. Will blinked, then could see the individual bits of faux snow accumulating, layering the truck with a sugary coating, and the white air looking crisp, brittle, about to break. She laughed, but it wasn't really a laugh. It was like words escaping under stress. "I, I guess not, Will. Not these days. Seems like only yesterday I felt too young. Now I feel too old."

Lana's face still flushed, her eyes looking uncomfortable, her smile struggling to remain. And her lips not moving. She wasn't the one speaking.

Will shifted his head a bit to the side and peered past the lovely young girl to the older woman sitting in the shadows on the passenger side. The woman leaned forward, and although the face was somewhat puffy, and makeup had cracked in not the most flattering ways, there was a ghost of a resemblance, and as if a mask of reluctance had been peeled away, Will recognized her with a jolting, almost sickening sensation.

He felt ashamed of himself. He'd never been one to care much about people's appearances, so why did it bother him that he might have passed Lana – at one time the love of his life – on the street and not even recognized her. It was as if he'd been in love with a different person.

"This is my daughter Julie. Julie this is Will, an old friend. We knew each other when we were kids."

"Hi, Julie," he said, and had to take a breath. "You look like your mother."

"Everybody says that." The girl didn't sound as friendly, or as sweet, as Will had first thought.

"Are you out from Denver for awhile?" Lana asked.

"Me and the family. I don't know for how long. I don't know when we should go back, or if."

She nodded, frowned. "A lot of the old crowd came back here. Jimmie, Carol, Suze. I don't know if they wanted to be

home at a time like this, if it even still feels like home, or if they thought it'd be better here. It's *not* really, I don't think. But it's more open out here. Maybe they figure these things will be easier to dodge out in the open." She shook her head.

"I know. But they come up so quickly. Maybe they're not dangerous, but maybe they are."

"I was sorry to hear about your dad," she said. "He didn't run into one of these things, did he?"

"No, he started getting confused, I don't know, at least a year before the first one appeared. I don't see how there could be a connection." She didn't say anything about Jeff, so Will figured she didn't know. Will wasn't about to bring him up. "The doctor prescribed a couple of drugs – they don't seem to help much, but I still make sure he takes them. And for now at least, the pharmacy here still gets them. And the grocery store still gets his favorite chocolate candies. If he didn't get those, well, he'd aggravate us all, I reckon." Will forced a chuckle, and was embarrassed by the fakeness of it.

"Do you think we'll have shortages? My sister does. She says we'll probably see the last supply deliveries any day now. She says why would people continue to do their jobs with all this going on?"

So here they were talking about illnesses and medicines and disasters freely roaming the world threatening everything. Just like old people. Why hadn't they worried about those things when they were younger? Maybe when you were young you really didn't understand what time it was, or how late it could all get to be. "What else are they going to do?" he asked. "It's like the president said – no one knows how long this will last, what it means, or what the final outcome will be, so people need to go on with their lives." It sounded stupid saying it, but he imagined it was still true.

"But that broadcast was three weeks ago. How's your television reception? We have a dish, and we're getting nothing."

"Nothing much at our place either. What does Ray say about all this?" He hoped he had the name right – he hadn't been there when she'd married, only heard about it.

The girl, Julie, looked flushed, and turned her head away. Lana's face fell back into the shadows, and her voice came out shakily. "My Ray died about three months back. COPD. He said it got a lot worse with this new weather, or whatever you want to call it. I don't know, Will – it was already pretty bad."

And again Will felt shame, because along with his sadness for her came this vaguely-formed notion that there might be a new opportunity for him in this. What was wrong with him? He wasn't going to leave his wife and son, so why think about it? He apologized, but of course did not fully explain why, and continued home toward Tracy, his family, and his present.

HIS EIGHTH GRADE teacher Mrs Anderson used to emphasize in her social studies class that even kids from a small town school could become anything they wanted to be if only they applied themselves. "Dream big!" she'd say, "Your dreams are the only thing that will limit you." In order to back up her thesis, throughout the school year she would sprinkle in inspirational stories about people from small towns who had "made a difference," who had made it "big."

Halfway in to high school Will, and many of his friends,

had concluded that this was all just so much propaganda, the purpose of which was – well – he wasn't sure, maybe to make Mrs Anderson feel better about teaching in such a small town. But they heard similar messages from other teachers, parents, pretty much anyone who came to speak to their class. Like relatively recent graduates on their way to the army or the peace corps.

Big dreams were great, but they almost always seemed to shrink when you talked to guidance counselors, recruiters, or anyone else charged with evaluating your prospects realistically. There were some important, socially-conscious things you could do with your life, certainly, but not *here*, and not for much monetary compensation. And these other careers, the ones Mrs Anderson talked about – the thinkers and writers and scientists and actors – well, all you had to be was somebody else, somebody else entirely, and from some other place.

On the trip back to his parents' farm it was relatively easy for Will to imagine himself, and this land, as something else entirely. The road, the fields, were bleached, as white as he could imagine, and as far as he could see. The whiteness intensified at times to such transparency Will imagined he could almost see to where life both entered the plants and exited them, where time ate through the world and transformed it all into something else. He might have been traveling across Russia before the revolution in his wagon, his buggy, or in middle Europe as it began its entry into the ice age, in nineteenth century Oklahoma in the dead of winter, the children starving, the wife suffering in their bed, a new baby on the way. And Will couldn't do much more than observe, and try to live, and keep his four wheels on the road, steady toward home.

The farmhouse looked as it had during that long-remembered blizzard the winter he was nine years old, when so many of the cows had died, and a stiffened pheasant stared at him from the front yard, its shining eyes frozen into jewels. A series of flashes drew his own eyes to that distant horizon line in the direction of Denver, and he considered it might be lightning, even though he knew better. Great blocks shifted there, weaving in and out of each other's way as if they had some sort of rudimentary intelligence. They appeared closer by the second, as if that city's buildings themselves were slowly advancing toward him across the eastern plains.

He pulled into the yard at the side of the house and jumped down onto the snow-laden ground, which cracked like layers of candy, allowing a white powdery residue to explode into the air with each of his steps. Of course this wasn't snow – it was nothing like snow. It was like the moments had been snatched from the air and allowed to die, left to litter the ground. He tried to step carefully, but still they fractured with very little force.

Inside the house there was the strong smell of cooking apples. A tree had been propped up in one corner. There were a few decorations on it, and his mother was sitting on the couch singing to herself and stringing popcorn into a garland.

Tracy pushed Jeff into the room and set the wheelchair brake. Their son's moaning stopped and he gazed at the tree. Will looked around for his father, found him in the corner by the front window, staring outside, motionless. Tracy came up to Will and stood there. She didn't smile, but for the first time in

a long time she didn't look furious. "What's all this?" he asked.

"Christmas," she replied. "At least according to your mother."

"But it's not Christmas," he said, although truthfully he wasn't completely sure anymore.

"Maybe, maybe not. Is there going to be another Christmas this year, Will? I certainly don't know. Do you?"

He shrugged. "I guess it won't hurt anything. It sure seems to have helped Jeff."

"Hold on to the moment. You used to say that a lot, remember? Why did you stop saying it – was it because of me?"

He shrugged again. "You know I used to like it when you hummed in the bathroom? But the last few years it really annoyed me. That was something I shouldn't have held on to. I mean really, why would that bother me so much?"

"You used to turn the dumbest things into a celebration. Remember when it was Thomas Edison's birthday, and you turned on all the lights in the house?"

"That was before Jeff's...accident. He'd had a really bad day. I ordered pizza and made a pretty bad birthday cake. It cheered him up."

"You wore a lamp on your head, plugged in and turned on. I thought you were going to electrocute yourself! I got so mad."

"You didn't want to be married to a child. I burned my ear pretty badly taking that contraption off."

"Your mother thought this would be a perfect thing, give us all a little something to look forward to. Is that where you got the idea to create all those special holidays? From her?"

"It was my dad," Will replied. "One day he bought my mother an alligator handbag. From that year on we celebrated 'Alligator Handbag Day.' There were special sandwiches. We wore tails made out of newspaper and did a little dance. Actually, my mother didn't always fully appreciate Alligator Handbag Day."

"I can believe that."

There were several moments of awkward silence, then Will said, "This doesn't mean you still love me, does it? I mean, this celebration, this stolen moment, doesn't change anything fundamentally, does it?"

"I don't think I blame you for Jeff anymore. I really don't."

"Things change, moments get away from you, the past pays a visit, and although there's no blame, still nothing is forgiven. It's hard to live here. It always has been," he said.

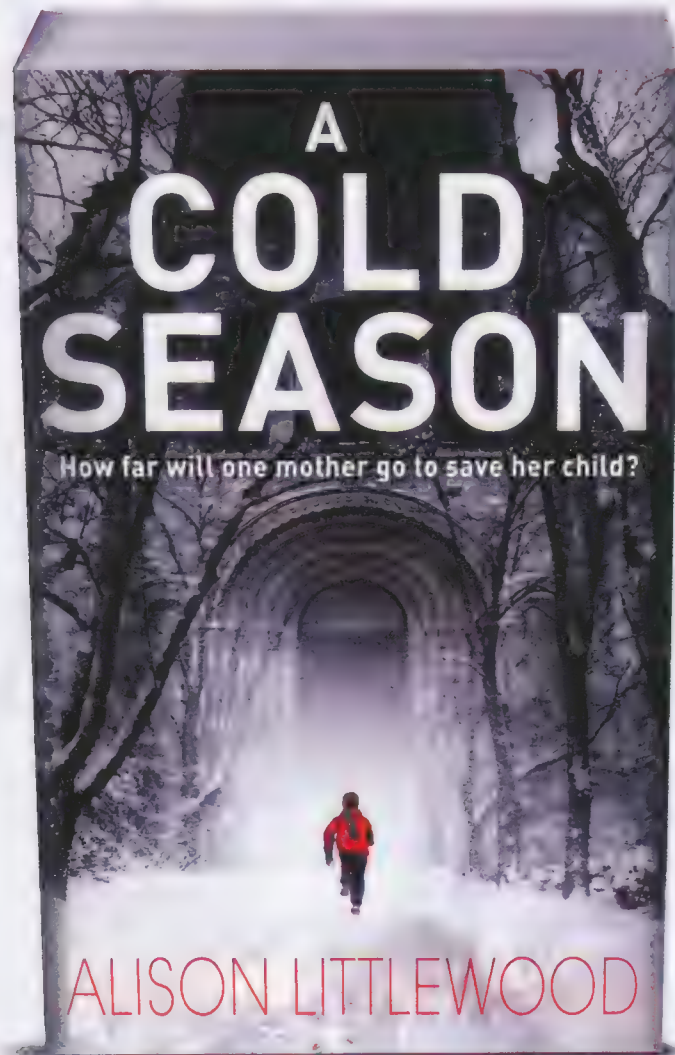
"Will – " she started to say, but his father drowned her out.

"Whooh whooh!" his father yelled by the window. "Whooh whooh!" The house shook with thunder.

A great striated wall moved past the glass. Will wondered if his healthy son was trapped inside there somewhere, if inside that wall he might find his wife's love again, or some other Will, some other life. He tried to say something to Tracy, but he couldn't even hear himself, so loud everything had suddenly become. He could feel time circling outside the house, circling again, raising its voice and ready to run them down.

Steve Rasnic Tem's new novel *Deadfall Hotel* is coming from Solaris Books in May. In this Edward Gorey-esque, Mervyn Peak-esque novel a widower takes the job of manager at a remote hotel where the guests are not quite like you and me, accompanied by his daughter and the ghost of his wife. Christopher Fowler says it "makes *The Shining's* Overlook Hotel look like Butlins". Visit the Tem home on the web at www.m-s-tem.com.

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Jon Wallace lives in Muswell Hill, London. Recently married, he divides his time between writing and hardly believing his luck. 'Lips and Teeth' is his second story to be published in *Interzone*. Visit Jon's website at thingaboutchickens.blogspot.com.

JON WALLACE

LIPS & TEETH

CAMP 15, YODOK, 16 DECEMBER JUCHE YEAR 100

The rain stops by morning, and a little sun breaks through the clouds, thank the Dear Leader. I get out of bed. I scratch at the lice. Then I pick up Jin-Song and step outside.

The yard is a small square of yellow and white mud, ten paces wide and twelve paces long. It's surrounded by a rotting dried mud wall, topped with rusty wire. In one place the wall has crumbled, leaving an opening. If I want, I can look out at the fields, all the way along the deep, narrow valley and up the mountains.

Sometimes there is a farmer with deep brown skin wading in the nearby paddy, carrying a tool that is not unlike Jin-Song. Sometimes I peer over at him and watch him work. I'm afraid of being caught, but Jin-Song is convinced that nobody watches me anymore.

In the corner of the yard is a pile of large rocks that it is my duty to break into smaller rocks. I start on the largest, most stubborn looking one, the one I didn't have the energy for yesterday. I lift Jin-Song over my head. He mutters:

"Here we go again."

I lower him, drained by his tone. As pickaxes go his blade is blunt, but his words are sharp. He thinks our incarceration is unjustified, our labour pointless. He also gets mad and spews treason about the Dear Leader, which I guess is why he's in here with me.

He's always telling me to escape, but I can't do it. It frustrates him, and he sometimes gives me the silent treatment. One time he didn't say a word to me for a year.

When he's not silent he talks my ear off about being special. He tries to make me think I deserve better than this. I tell him – if that were the case I wouldn't be here.



"You used to have balls," he says.

"Let's just get on with the work."

"This isn't work. This is punishment. You do know that this is a prison, right? You do know that?"

"I'm not a prisoner. I am being re-educated."

Ha. He doesn't have an answer to that. It feels good to outwit him. He thinks he is so much smarter than me.

We start smashing the rocks, having talked enough for one morning. I only manage four swings before I am crumpled on my haunches, gasping for air. How old am I, anyway?

"You're 31," says Jin-Song.

"No, no, that can't be right. I must be older."

"Physically, yes. That's what a diet of gruel, rat and earthworm will do for you."

I pant and stare at the rocks.

There is a seashell lying in the rubble. I pick it up and turn it over in my blackened fingers. I have not seen a shell like this in...how long have I been here?

I know the date precisely, but I can't remember when I was born, or how I came to be here, or how long I have been here. I know the days pass but I do not count them, ever. What would that achieve? Time here passes in ages. This is the age of acceptance. There was also an age of despair, and one of hope, or maybe anger, before that. I don't remember clearly. It's like that school textbook I once had – I can see the cover but can't recall the pages inside.

The shell is from an age that passed in days and even hours. An age where I sat on the beach and watched my father fishing.

"Nice shell," says Jin-Song. "I wonder how it got here?"

"It must be a gift from the Dear Leader."

"Oh, for heaven's sake..."

"You can't deny it. Only he could have provided it!"

I hold it in the palm of my hand. Briefly I'm seized by the urge to crush it to dust, but I hold back. If the Dear Leader meant me to have it I should not reject it. I drop it into my pocket and lift Jin-Song over my head, ready to get back to work.

"Here we go again," he says.

CAMP 15, YODOK, 17 DECEMBER JUCHE YEAR 100

I cannot tell exactly what is happening because my yard is sealed off from the rest of the camp. Something about me is infectious and I am locked away, out of sight.

My cell has no windows. I never speak to the guards. I do not attend political education classes. Food is passed under my rotting, black, wooden door.

Still, I can hear a commotion nearby. I hear chanting, wailing and screaming.

I try to ignore it. I lie on my bunk and shiver, scratching at the lice, and turn the shell over in my fingers. It is perfectly intact, from fat end to curling point. I remember that it was rare to find them in such perfect shape on the beach.

I look into the shell and suddenly I remember the courtyard at university, the dead staring at me. I see the courtroom. I remember being unable to speak. I recall sitting in the back of the truck, driving up into the brown mountains, and soldiers laughing at me. I remember the blue room, and the pain of

bamboo shoots pushed under my fingernails.

What is it that I did?

"I'm sick of telling you," says Jin-Song. "You'll just forget again."

There is a noise. I sit up on my bunk and regard the door. Someone is knocking.

"Prisoner 11-17. Prisoner, are you in there?"

I fall off the bed I am so startled. I get up off my knees, dropping the shell into my pocket, and stagger to the door.

"Yes, sir," I reply. "Yes, sir, I am here, thank you, sir."

Jin-Song fumes at my grovelling tone, but I must thank the guard. I haven't spoken to a person in so long. I want to embrace him. I want to tell him my name. Who am I anyway? My name is...my name is...

"Prisoner 11-17. You will join the other prisoners in the main recreation yard for our day of national mourning."

"Mourning?"

There is a rusty shriek. The door is opened. A young major stares at me. Two privates stand behind him.

"You will shave, prisoner. You will shave and dress."

"Yes, I will shave and dress. Thank you, sir."

The guards push me out of the cell, behind the major, out into the courtyard and...

People! Hundreds, maybe thousands of other prisoners. They are lined up in neat rows, all on their knees, all wailing in horror. The noise is incredible. An old man chews on his hat, biting off pieces and spitting them out. Women shriek and pull their hair. I want to call out to them but I do not know what to say. What has happened?

I am pushed past the crowd, into another hut. I flinch when they push me into a chair, thinking of the blue room, but then a corporal with a moustache begins to shave me. He is weeping too and his hands tremble. He starts with scissors, then moves on to electric trimmers. I sit and stare into the small mirror. I watch my face appear from behind the beard. I remember this face and I smile.

The corporal stops his work. He slaps me hard across the face. "You might be simple, but you do not smile today. Do you hear me?" He pulls my hair, wrenching my head back, tears pouring down his cheeks. "Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

He gathers himself, wipes away his tears, and finishes his work.

I am led back out into the wailing yard. Thousands of bald, half-starved figures kneel in the yellow and white mud, boxed in by the black dormitory huts. A poster of the Dear Leader hangs from a watchtower, smiling at their grief. The soldiers drop me to my knees at the edge of the crowd.

"Prisoner 11-17. You will mourn. You will return to your cell in three hours."

"Please, sir," I ask, "what has happened?"

"The Dear Leader has ascended to the heavens." He marches away. The two young guards take their place in the mourners, then begin crying and wailing themselves. Only the major doesn't cry. He watches me, frowning.

I am not sure how best to mourn, so I watch my neighbour, an old man with hairy ears. He is banging his head onto a rock. I copy him, crashing my head as hard as I can onto a jagged

white stone. Still no tears come.

I realise now, listening to this noise, that it is true. The Dear Leader is dead. Yet I feel nothing but the lice crawling over me. I hold my eyes open until they sting. A few precious, merciful tears roll down my cheeks.

In a few hours the guards toss me back into my cell.

Jin-Song is propped against my cot. I drop next to him and bring the shell out of my pocket. It is still in one piece.

A terrible sadness overwhelms me and I begin to sob uncontrollably. Grief like I have never known shakes and twists me. I get to my feet, go to the rotting black door and thump on it as hard as I can.

"Let me out! Let me out! I'm ready to mourn now!"

Nobody comes. I sit on the bed. I howl and sniff and scratch at the lice, until eventually I am quiet again.

"Do you feel better?" asks Jin-Song.

"Yes, thank you."

"Did you notice something?" he asks me.

"What?"

"They didn't gag you. You are supposed to be gagged at all times, you know. I wonder if they've forgotten?"

CAMP 15, YODOK, 18 DECEMBER JUCHE YEAR 100

Whatever Jin-Song thinks they've forgotten, they've remembered. The two guards are back, wearing ear muffs. They look ridiculous, and they seem to know it. They throw me onto my back, and push a rag into my mouth.

I am dragged out into the main yard again, staggering barefoot through the mud. The prisoners are all there again, wailing and beating themselves. If only they had seen me last night. I expect to join them, but instead I am dragged past them, through the rows of stinking black huts, through a gate that leads to the guards' quarters.

Inside there are two neat concrete accommodation blocks with tile roofs. A small hut sits between them. I am pulled up the steps and shown inside.

The major sits behind a desk, his wide brimmed hat resting on the table before him. He nods to the two guards. They drop me in a chair, salute, and leave. It is wonderfully warm in here. The major has a heater which sweeps the room, warming my frozen nose. Thank the Dear Leader. Do I still say that? I suppose so. I wish someone would tell me who to thank now.

The major doesn't look up from his file. He picks up a cup of tea, slurps it noisily and gasps. "We have a snake among us." He looks up and smiles. "Do you remember how you came to be here, 11-17?"

I shake my head. Jin-Song says people died because of something I did. I was trying to lead people somewhere, trying to change something...but what? The major slurps his tea again and nods.

"You do not recall what it was that you were arrested for? It was quite a unique case. I have been reviewing your file and I can honestly say that I do not know of another like it."

I shake my head again.

"Do you remember any of your time at Camp 25?"

Was that the place with the blue room? It may have been.

Nobody told me where I was at the time. They were too busy pushing bamboo under my fingernails.

The major shakes his head. "No. Judging by the treatments listed here I can't say I'm surprised." He sits up, running his hand over his thin hair. "If I remove your gag you will not speak unless spoken to. Is that understood?"

I nod. He stands, steps around the table, and unties the gag. It is a relief to have the taste out of my mouth. He takes his seat and pushes a cup of tea towards me.

"Go on," he says.

I reach forward and drink. "Thank you, sir"

He smiles again. "I was going to have you shot yesterday, do you know that?"

"No, sir."

He holds his belly like an expectant mother.

"Your quarters over there take up a lot of space. I have only joined the camp this month and I couldn't understand why you deserved such space all to yourself. A good thing I read your file. You have unique talents 11-17, which may be of use in the quest to complete our revolution. Do you understand?"

"I understand, sir."

If I can help I will.

"Now before we can go any further I need to know exactly how badly they damaged you at Camp 25. From what I read they made a complete mess of you. I quote from your chief interrogator's report: 'Subject's political re-education has compromised ability for independent action of the kind required by intelligence services.'"

The major drops the file, lights a cigarette, inhales deeply. He taps ash onto the floor. "That's the curse of our countrymen, I think. Trying to achieve too much too quickly. Trying to leap too far forward, too quickly."

"Well, even if you can't be sent abroad you may yet be of real service. You're clearly deficient mentally but what I need to know is...does your voice still have the same power? Can you still persuade people to do your bidding, 11-17?"

I turn the shell over in my hand. The question makes a kind of sense to me. It is also completely meaningless. The major claps his hands.

"OK. Time for a simple test. I am going to call in one of the guards. When he comes in I want you to tell him to shoot himself. Do you understand?"

I chew my lip, uncertain.

"Look, 11-17. Let me spell this out for you. If you can't do this there's no reason for your accommodation here to go on. You've survived until now by slipping through the cracks, but that's over now. If you can't do this I will have to shoot you and demolish your little hut. Do you understand, 11-17? You need to give this everything you've got."

"I will, sir."

The major stands, walks behind me, opens the door. He calls in one of the guards, who walks in and stands at attention. He's lost his earmuffs.

The major sits on the edge of his desk and narrows his eyes at me. "Well?"

I stare at the guard and say nothing. I don't want to hurt him.

The major prods his cigarette out on the desk. I think I have made him feel foolish. I wonder what Jin-Song would advise

in this situation? Probably something like: "Do what he says, you idiot!"

I look up at the guard. "Hey," I say.

He glances at me.

"Shoot yourself."

The guard picks up his rifle, jams it in his mouth, and pulls the trigger. The back of his head blows out across the office.

The major steps carefully through the mess and kicks the soldier with his boot. "Well done, 11-17," he says. "Most impressive. Now put that rag back in your mouth."

I replace the rag.

"You have done well," he says, re-tying the gag firmly. "You have done very well. We will work closely together, you and I. We will be as close as lips and teeth."

He grins, as if he finds this very amusing.

CAMP 15, YODOK, 21 DECEMBER JUCHE YEAR 100

We are breaking up the rocks in the yard. Jin-Song is very excited by developments.

"This is excellent. This could get us out of here. We might never have to smash another rock again."

"I don't see why?"

"I've been telling you this stuff for years. Your words have power over people. They do whatever you tell them to. Why do you think I've been begging you to speak to that farmer? You could have told him to break you out anytime and he'd have done it!"

"Nonsense."

I bring him down with a crash onto a stubborn rock. He bounces off without effect.

"It's not nonsense. Don't you remember what you did at University? You had a thousand students ready to burn down the Supreme People's Assembly."

I laugh.

"It's true. You know it's true, you cretin! They had to shoot that entire university to stop you!"

I close my eyes and smash him onto the rocks harder than ever.

"I would never threaten the Dear Leader."

"OK, let's not get tied up in that again. You'll only forget. The important thing is that this major obviously wants to use your power for his own ends, which almost certainly means leaving the camp. He'll have to take your gag off at some point, and that's when you'll strike! You tell him to drive you to the Chinese border. He'll do it, believe me. Everyone does what you say."

"I want to stay here."

"I know, I know. That's why you're going to need to take me with you."

"You? Why would I take you?"

"Because I'm the only one you can't persuade."

23 DECEMBER JUCHE YEAR 100

When we drive out the gates I can barely contain my excitement,

but Jin-Song keeps me calm. The major laughed when I asked to bring my pickaxe. Whatever makes you happy, he said.

We drive along empty roads, passing people on foot. I'm not sure if they're prisoners or normal people.

The major is driving us in an army truck. The heater is broken and we can see our breath. We go on and on for hours, driving through the night, until the sun rises. I stare out the window, shivering, scratching at lice, wanting to laugh or sing or cry out.

The major doesn't say anything for the entire journey, apart from: "Damn cold."

Then we meet a track and begin to climb up into the brown mountains. Something about the road is familiar. It makes me want to vomit. The major lights a cigarette.

"As you know 11-17, the Dear Leader ascended to the heavens last week. What you don't know is that our imperialist enemies have taken the opportunity to intrigue against us, to plot counter revolutionary activities. They have corrupted some of our weak-spirited comrades. They plot against the revolution and we have to stop them, do you understand? These are uncertain times, and uncertainty breeds trouble. We must be decisive. We must snuff out the flame of counter revolution immediately. The Eternal President himself has charged us with this mission, so we cannot let him down. Do you understand?"

I nod. Jin-Song scoffs. The major points at me.

"You yourself plotted against the revolution at one time. But the Eternal President gave you the opportunity for re-education, and now he is giving you the chance to complete your redemption. Do not disappoint him."

He leans in closer.

"Now listen, 11-17. In a minute we are going to reach some gates. You are going to get out of the truck and speak to the guards. You're going to tell them to shoot themselves, just like you did with the man in camp. Understand?"

"This is it!" says Jin-Song. "Now's your chance. When he removes the gag tell him to drive us to the border."

The major removes orange plugs from a plastic case and presses them into his ears. Only then does he remove my gag.

Jin-Song is angry. "Sneaky bastard. He knows what you can do."

We approach the gate. A large 25 is printed on a metal sign above it. Either side are two watchtowers. Behind I can see a driveway, leading up to a huge concrete cube.

CAMP 25, CHONJIN, 23 DECEMBER JUCHE YEAR 100

The guards start shouting at us as we slow down. The major pulls up, and they surround the truck. The major rolls down his window and has a gun pressed into this ear. They ask him what he is doing here, demanding papers. I've never seen one soldier threaten another before.

The major punches my arm. "Do it, prisoner, now!"

"Let the bastard die!" says Jin-Song.

I jump out of the truck. The guards prime their weapons and surround me, dragging me towards the gate. I see another two pull the major out of the cabin.

I scream out the words.

The guards turn their guns on themselves and tumble in a hail of gunfire.

The major gets to his feet, nursing a cut on his head. I go to help him up. He strikes me hard across the face. "What the hell were you waiting for?"

"Hit him back!" yells Jin-Song from the truck. "There's just the two of you. Pick up a gun and shoot him!"

I can't do that. Finally I am part of the revolution. Finally, somebody is telling me what I must do.

We pass through the gate and drive towards the cube. Even in the gloom I recognise it. Somewhere in there is the blue room. Nothing stirs. Did nobody hear the shooting?

We drive around to the back, and I am startled to see a small, pristine house, with a lawn. There are a few lights on inside. We park and walk to the rear. The grass is soft and strokes my bare feet. We walk up a flight of stone steps to a quiet porch. The major presses a button in the wall. There's the distant sound of a bell.

A maid answers the door. The major grabs her, puts his hand over her mouth, and looks at me. "Tell her to show us where her master is."

I do as I am told. So does she. She leads us down a corridor. Paintings of white people hang on the walls. There are no images of the Dear Leader or our revered Eternal President. The carpet is even softer and deeper than the grass.

The maid shows us into a large room. A fire burns in a hearth. An old man in a dressing gown sits in a leather armchair, reading a book. He hasn't noticed us. The major looks at me, presses a finger to his lips, and removes his earplugs. Then he pulls his gun and shoots the maid in the back of the head.

The old man turns. He looks at me, then at the maid.

The major grins. "You backed the wrong horse."

The old man almost smiles. He lowers his book and removes his glasses. "That suggests we have a race. All I see is one half mad donkey running backwards. And you're asking everyone to be excited."

The major shakes his head. "Why did you do it? Why try to disrupt the succession?"

The old man considers. "Guilt," he says.

The major shrugs. "OK, let's get to the point. You're going to tell me who else is with you."

The man snorts. "Never. There's nothing you can do to compel me, major. I know too much about pain to be made to talk. You know that."

The major presses the plugs back in his ears. "Well to be precise," he says, "you're going to tell him." He points at me.

The old man peers almost through me. I might recognise him. I think I know him. I tell him to give us the names of who else is involved (in what?). Instantly he reels off a list of names, tears pouring down his cheeks. I wonder what else he would do if I told him to. I remember wondering the same thing as my fellow students stood in the courtyard, cheering me, ready to follow me. I remember the feeling of power.

When he is done the major claps his hands. "OK. Ask him where his family is hiding."

The major stands on the porch with me, smoking a cigarette. He even takes out his earplugs. I think about telling him to drive me to the border, as Jin-Song suggested, but I know I won't do it. He seems to savour this moment.

"You did well," he says. "You will live, 11-17."

"Will I be freed?" The voice doesn't sound like mine.

"No. I need you to stay where you are. You are a useful tool. I may need to call on you again."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir."

"You should be proud," he says. Cigarette finished, he replaces his earplugs. "Come on, time to get you home."

I trail after him, looking forward to getting back. In the camp I will forget what I've seen.

CAMP 15, YODOK, 23 JANUARY JUCHE YEAR 101

"Proud of yourself?" asks Jin-Song.

It's the first thing he's said to me in a month. He wanted me to kill the major on the way back from the mission, or jump out of the truck and run away. I ignored him and he is furious with me.

The major locked us up. I know I will never see him again. Jin-Song said he probably took the old man's position in the new government. He said that is how things work. I told him I didn't believe him and he started with the silent treatment. Now he's talking again. I'm surprised.

"Have you forgiven me?"

"For what? Murder?"

"I didn't kill them."

"No, no, you just watched. Much better. I suppose I shouldn't criticise. It was revenge on your part, after all."

"What? No it wasn't!"

"Yes it was. It's just your dodgy memory doesn't know it. I can understand you wanting to see the old swine suffer after what he did to you. Trouble is that he was one of the few people in this country who could have made a change. He was a brutal enough bastard to see it through. Probably had some kind of coup set up. It would probably have failed but you never know. He might have changed things more than you ever managed. And you had to go and kill him."

I am enraged. I have finally done something of value and still he finds fault. I grip his handle until my knuckles turn white. Heaving with all my might I throw him over the wall.

I pace around in the yellow mud. I pull the shell out of my pocket and find that it is damaged, a hole smashed in the fat end.

I stare through it and see the face of an old man, smiling in the blue room. I drop to my knees into the mud and ask the Dear Leader for guidance. Then I remember he's dead.

"Excuse me," says a voice.

The farmer stands at the broken section of wall, smiling, holding Jin-Song. "Would you like this back?"

I wave him away. "No. No. I don't want it."

"Oh." The farmer frowns. "Can I help at all?"

I wipe my eyes and look at him. "Well...perhaps you can."

Jin-Song sighs, swinging in the farmer's grip.

"Here we go again." ♦

CAMP 25, CHONJIN, 24 DECEMBER JUCHE YEAR 100

TANGERINE NECTARINE CLEMENTINE APOCALYPSE BY SUZANNE PALMER

BOTA'S FRUIT STAND IS NEAR THE RIMSIDE DOCKS, AND he is quiet and kind and makes no trouble except for when he has his visions. In other times or places, or in the make-believe worlds of the books that occupy all my free time and no small amount of my dreams, such a man might have been driven from his people, or burnt at the stake, or otherwise dramatically ill-treated, but this is Utopia. The worst that can be said to have been done to him is that his stand is not in the Hub of the city, as perhaps it should have been.



His quirks that exiled him here on the Rim account for my own presence here as well; he had refused any apprentice until he laid eyes on me, standing at the back of the group of children presented to him, with my mind adrift and my heart firmly set on becoming a teller of stories not a distributor of fruit. "That one," he said, pointing unmistakably at me. "That one I can save."

I suppose I could have resented that, such an early and final end to my personal aspirations, but we are good citizens and we serve where we are needed. And truth is, it isn't a bad life; we have our own Apparatus Node, one of only two fruit-producers in the entire Rim, and the docks afford an opportunity to see people from other worlds, bringing mysterious and wonderful things to trade the likes of which we have never known and could barely have imagined and yet also rarely need.

Bota elbows me, not ungently. "Guests, Echa," he says.

I tuck my book-reader under the counter as a small retinue of people approach. I can tell from their clothes that they're from the Hub; certainly no one in Utopia would deserve or own finer things than any other, but it does seem that Hub clothiers know the art of design and ornamentation better than those here on the Rim. Their Node must have superior patterns for cloth-making, just as ours has a reputation for the sweetest fruits.

The man in the center of the group has clothing nearly as fine as an Elder, and the others seem to move around him as if he is their gravitational center. The fragrance of *laisi*, another thing found in the Hub and not here, seems to cling to him like a cloud. He comes straight up to our stall, surveying our display of apples, oranges, and berries with an expression of distaste. "Old man," he says, and I nearly take offense at that – are we not all equals in Utopia, and is not respectful address due us all? – but before I can correct the man on his behavior Bota moves between us.

"Sir? What may I provide you?" Bota spreads his hand out over our display.

"A return of my time, wasted making the trek out here because of the reputation of your fruit. I see nothing special."

"Our apples are noteworthy," Bota says. "If sweet is what you are looking for, this is a Kaiser Wilhelm." He holds up and out the yellow-red apple, but the man shakes his head. "If crisp is more to your taste, this beauty is a Harry Pring. Its pattern dates back to Old Earth. Perhaps a French Braeburn –"

"Enough. I do not wish an apple of any sort," the man says. "And your mannerless boy is glaring at me."

Bota turns, raising his eyes in exasperation, and I do my best to school my features. "Echa is rightly very proud of our apples, sir," he says. "I am sure he means no disrespect by it. But if not apples, perhaps pears? I have Limonera and Guyot. Or oranges – always a pleasure, and so healthy for our bodies."

"I want nothing common," the man says, his voice rising. Others are beginning to gather around the stall now, mostly regulars and neighbors from our section of the Rim. "What do you have that's special? Unique?"

A woman clings to his arm. "Irich, can we please go home now? I don't like this place or these dirty people."

I see Bota's eyes glaze over for the merest instant and I reach for his arm, but he moves quickly when a fit is upon him. "For

the lady," he says, hand reaching into the keeper-drawers beneath the stand and emerging with a small, round, yellowish melon whose surface is covered with a texture like fine netting. "A Galia. Eat it chilled and by itself, and it will comfort you when you are cold and alone tonight."

The woman takes it, blinking at Bota as if still working through what he has said. "What the –" the man starts, but Bota is not done yet.

"For the gentleman, a tangerine." He holds out the large orange-yellow fruit.

Neri, who runs a footwear stand near ours, snickers. The sound is echoed here and there throughout the gathered crowd. The man whirls around, staring at her, then back at us. "What is the meaning of this?" he demands.

"Bota gives them to those who've broken their vows," Neri explains, too loudly, to another local beside her.

The man moves up against the counter, and I edge closer, my eyes seeking out the broom where I had earlier leaned it, in case of the unthinkable. "How dare you?" His voice is rising. "Who put you up to this?"

Bota is standing there, eyes focused on nothing, not moving. He will not snap out of it until they, and the fruit, are gone. "Sir, please take your fruit and move along," I say.

"Everybody knows now!" Neri calls out. "Except maybe your woman, but she's figuring it out!"

The man throws the tangerine to the ground, turns, and stalks away. His retinue follows, a little less dutifully than before. The woman with the melon straggles far behind, looking at the melon and back at us with sad eyes.

When they are gone at last, disappeared up the curve, Neri walks up, still smiling. "How about it, then, Seer Bota?" she asks. "What fruit for me?"

Bota is still in his mood, and without blinking or showing any emotion at all on his face reaches down and hands her a nectarine. Neri's face falls. "No, Bota, no joking around with me like with that Hubber fellow. Take it back."

He just stands there, and the crowd begins to murmur, and Neri clutches the nectarine to her chest and hurries away.

Bota shakes for several long moments then comes back to himself, and puts his hands over his face. "It means nothing," he says, his voice barely above a whisper. But we all know, when he's in his visions, the nectarine is death.

I put my arms around him. For all that he's not my father, he's been more of one to me than my own had been. "It's okay," I say.

"No," he says. "It's not."

Even though he's out of the mood, the crowd drifts away. It will be a slow day for us, and perhaps a slow week as word of the nectarine gets around. It will be worse if something befalls Neri, which none of us who have lived in and around Bota doubt.

I help him to the back of our tent to lie down. I don't expect the stand to be busy enough to need more than one of us. Indeed, my expectations are low enough that I pick up my book-reader and bring it out front with me. Nor am I disappointed.

THE NEXT MORNING we receive word that Neri has been found dead inside her own tent, the back of her head caved in, the

uneaten nectarine on the floor beside her body. Chema, who brought us the news, also mentions that the inside of the tent smelled faintly of *laisi*.

Surely no one in Utopia would have intentionally brought harm to the old shoe-sharer? Still, it seems foolish to think that yesterday's incident had nothing to do with it. I share my fears with Bota, but he tells me that the Hub man will not harm me. I don't see how that can be, for surely if Neri mocked him, it was Bota and I that provided the cause for her to do so, but I keep my doubts to myself.

We wrap Neri in a curtain from her shop and carry her to a Return Node, a procession of Rim folks from our arc behind us. No one speaks, but Bota seems the most silent of all.

SHARING IS SLOW but steady for the next several days. If they are wary of Bota's visions, his absence from the front of the stand is a small help – everyone knows the fruit means nothing, from my hand, and I am well-enough liked for my own sake. A few who have known me for a long time ask me to tell them stories, but I demur; I am a fruit-sharer's apprentice now, and never anything more.

Many of our near neighbors ask after Bota. I answer that he is well but tired, and they understand. Bota has had the stand here for more than thirty years. Distant neighbors come seeking details of the Hub man's visit, but I am not a gossip and say only that he had come and been dissatisfied with his fruit selection. If not entirely honest, it seems honest enough. No one asks directly about Neri; there are no answers there that want finding.

By the third day, our stocks of fruit out front are finally growing low. I go back to our repository to see what we have stored. Several dozen each of apples and oranges, of course – the Apparatus does seem to favor the basics – as well as blueberries, cherries, a handful of plums, and kiwis. Nothing particularly unusual, which is good. I make some estimations in my head and then place my hand against the palm circle of our Node. "Please," I say, "we need more fruit. Enough for forty."

The circle flashes green once. "Thank you," I say, and take my hand away. Interacting directly with the Node scared me when I first joined Bota, but even though I now understand that it's just a machine with no intelligence of its own beyond that which we built into it, such knowledge does not make me feel any less humbled and privileged to be allowed to ask for such gifts. The Apparatus is the heart of Utopia; it keeps us spinning near our chosen sun, provides us with an up and down, keeps us warm in the cold of space, gives us the air we breathe and the food we eat in such abundance and variety. How could we not share with each other, when everything every one of us has is a gift? Some of the books I read talk of commerce, of profit and the greed that drives it, but it seems something we have, gratefully, grown beyond.

Like murder, my thoughts whisper to me, but I do not wish to hear it.

I throw what fruit we have left on a wide tray to carry out front. The Node will tell us when it has provided.

Chema is glad of the kiwis, and her apprentice Nai of the plums. Neri had no apprentice, so the Elders have sent us a young man named Omo, formerly an apprentice to another

shoe-sharer on the far side of the Rim, to run Neri's stand. Lacking much else to do I bring him the last of the plums as a welcome, and he seems pleased by the gift. He asks me about the accident that befell his stand's former occupant, and I am at a loss. "She was hit on the head," I say at last.

"By what?" He looks around and up, as if checking for what might fall on him. He did not ask *by who*; who here would ask that?

"We don't know," I say, and again it is a shade of truth.

"I heard it had something to do with your Master."

"Bota is a good man," I say, and that is no shade at all. "Sometimes he sees things, as if a veil has been lifted that hides the future world from the rest of us. It is a strange and unlucky gift."

Omo lets out his breath and smiles. "Oh!" he says. "Such things are Rim nonsense, certainly! I thank you for the fruit, though. Are you in need of shoes?"

I look down at my feet, and indeed my own shoes are worn and in disrepair. For some reason, some fault of my character, I don't want Omo's sharing right now. "These still have some days left in them," I say. "I'll be sure to visit when they've run out."

He puts his hand on my shoulder in friendship. I return the gesture, though it feels false and empty, and make the short walk up the curve back to our stand. No one is waiting.

I can hear the gentle chime of the Node as I slip back behind the counter, so in absence of any need for me out front I go straight back. Lifting the heavy glass door to the provision chamber I slide out the tray of new fruits, each still encased in its growth shell. Bananas, a Piel de Sapo, red currants, a pair of pomegranates, figs, nectarines, cherimoya, and a lone quenepa all mixed in with the usual apples and oranges –

I pause, my hand frozen above the tray. A pomelo.

"Give it to me," Bota says from behind me, startling me so badly I jump. When I had entered he was still curled up underneath his old red blanket and I'd assumed he was asleep.

My hand is shaking as I pick up the giant green fruit and set it gently in his outstretched palms. He is careful not to crack the thin, transparent shell as he carries it away from the Node and towards the stand. His face has gone still, his eyes focused only on the fruit, and I'm not sure he's even aware that I'm there, but I still hold back the curtain for him, and open the door to the recycler. He sets the fruit down inside with all the tenderness one might use setting a baby upon a cushion, and very slowly pushes the door closed again until it clicks.

He presses the button. The light on the front goes from green to red, then to yellow a few seconds later, then back to green after a minute, and his face relaxes. The pomelo has been turned to a fine dust, its component elements swept back into the system to become part of new things: a cushion, fabric for a curtain, an apple.

"It's too early," he says, and then it's as if a portal has opened in his mind, and starlight shines again in the darkness there. I catch him before he falls, and tuck him back under his red blanket. He mumbles a few familiar words at me, some personal mantra of comfort he says in times like this. I tell him to go back to sleep, and he does.

His visions, he has told me, are often like dreams, and re-

membering the substance of them after they have gone is difficult. Sometimes he remembers things clearly, but more often than not he has only glimpses, feelings and premonitions. The pomelos, though... I don't understand about the pomelos. I don't believe Bota does, either. The pattern came to this stand thirty-five years ago when he was apprentice; the original was the lone of its kind among several fruit brought from another settlement as a goodwill gesture. It may be the only fruit across all of Utopia, from Rim to spinning Rim, that I have never tasted.

Later, after a slow but steady afternoon and evening, I visit the nearest vegetable stand and bring home some carrots and onions. I have some noodles left over, and together with a mild sauce it is enough for a simple dinner before I, too, succumb to a fitful sleep.

BOTA IS HIMSELF again in the morning, for which I am grateful. Guests continue to be steady but light. He has only one of his visions, when he picks out a large batch of strawberries for a woman from the bakery. She goes away delighted; the last two women who received gifted strawberries had babies on the way. Bota looks sad after she has gone, but the reminder that sometimes he sees good fortune instead of bad spreads slowly up and down the curving corridor of the Rim, and traffic begins to pick up.

I am exhausted from several days of handling the stand on my own, and after the third thing I drop Bota sends me back to rest. "I ran the stand on my own well enough long before you were here," he said. "I can manage the rest of the morning on my own, Echa. Sleep, or read, or whatever you would like to do."

In the end I crawl into my cot and pick up my book-reader, and don't make it more than half a page before I am fast asleep, the reader pressed against my chest, the quiet dreams it carries mingling with my own.

"ECHA!" BOTA STICKS his head through the curtains into the back of the stand. "Travelers!"

Travelers is his word for other-worlders. If there's a ship in at the nearby docks, that means crowds. I won't say that Utopia can be dull, but opportunities to indulge curiosity are uncommon enough that few will willingly pass one up. I had slept into early afternoon and had just finished a late lunch and picked up my reader, but with less regret than usual I set it back down on my still-unmade bunk and go forward.

As always I wonder what it must be like to travel among the stars. When I was younger and indulged in storytelling of my own, inevitably I fancied the subject of space travel, I'm sure with all the accuracy one would expect from a small, station-bound boy. There are places along the Rim where there are gaps between tents and the heavy drapes and tapestries that cover all the walls of Utopia are pulled back, revealing small portholes set in the cold gray metal of Utopia's usually-hidden shell. You can look out, at least when your side is not directly facing the sun, and I would often stare at the stars for hours. I think the reason space is dark and the stars only tiny, distant lights is because if space were bright, we would be so overwhelmed by the visible vastness of it we would not be able to function.

The figs go quickly, as do the bananas. And then, sticking above the heads of the crowd I see three of the flared, blue velvet hats of the Elders, dipping forward and back as they weave their way through. My heart quickens; I wonder if the Travelers are with them, coming this way. Would they be people like us, or true aliens born in one of the Universe's many other cradles? In some ways the other humans are more fascinating, since their differences can be more aptly seen in comparison to ourselves. Aliens are mostly unfathomable, incomparable, and strange.

The wide curve of the Rim is now so packed with people hardly anyone can move along the center, though there is a small, swift current of people along the edges and a steady outgo of our stock along with it. I take a moment to dash in back and ask the Node for more, then catch my breath before rushing back out to the excited chaos.

By their hats, the Elders are very near. Bota is busy explaining how to best eat a loquat, so I am the one standing at the front of the stand when two of the Elders finally break through the crowd directly before me. An exceptionally tall and hairless man, his skin faintly green, is walking between them.

The Traveler stops, his eyes upon the small handful of lychees I had been moving over into the space vacated by the loquat so as to showcase them better. "Ah! Ah!" he exclaims. The Elders, a large entourage, and another greenish man stand behind him, lost in conversation with one another.

He points at the fruit, and I hold them out to him. "Lychee," I say.

"Lychee," he agrees. "Very long time since I've eaten one." His accent is strange, almost lilting, the words half-sung, but fully intelligible.

"Please, have them," I say. "If you can eat them – I'm afraid I don't know what fruits a green man can eat."

He laughs. "I'm as human as you," he says. "We're trying to learn to use starlight directly, like plants." He shrugs. "Doesn't taste as nice as lychee."

"What does starlight taste like?"

"Like warmth, and a good night's sleep," he says. Gently he takes a lychee, pulls a small, black blade from his jacket pocket, and cuts carefully around the stem. Then he squeezes, the fruit pops out of the skin, and he pops it into his mouth. "Ah!" he says again, his eyes wide, startlingly white in his green face. "What's your name, child?"

"Echa," I say.

"Echa," he repeats. "This is the best lychee I have ever had. I must admit, I never would expect such exceptional fruit on a space station on the edge of the Bounds, of all places. How is this so?"

"Our Apparatus, when it makes a pattern, has logic mechanisms to analyze the characteristics most inherent to the original and enhance them. In the case of fruit: sweetness. Or tartness, or sometimes sour, depending. For a knife: sharpness. For fabric: strength, or softness, or vibrancy of color."

I feel I've explained it remarkably well, given the jumpiness in my stomach – talking to a Traveler, *me*, and not entirely babbling! He picks up another lychee from my hand. "So if they're replicated, they all taste exactly the same? Even as exquisite as this, doesn't that eventually become dull?"

"Every fruit-sharer has different patterns. Since the originals

will have differences from each other, so the patterns will be enhanced slightly differently. Thus, if I truly want a different lychee, I can walk a quarter-turn up the curve and eat one from another stand there."

"Ah. And would it be even better than this?"

I smile. "Bota has the best fruit in all of Utopia, sir. And there are some fruits that only we have, and no one else."

At his name, Bota comes over. He bows low to the Traveler. "Honored traveler," he says. "Please be welcome at my fruit stand."

"Oh, I have been most welcomed." He returns the bow, a little awkwardly, as if that is not his own custom. "I'm Jed, from Beenjai Six. This is my partner, Hern." He gestures to the other green man, and when Hern walks closer, Jed takes another lychee from my hand, slices the stem off, and hands it to him.

The Elders crowd around as well, and I hand out what I have left of my lychees to them. I have more in back if needed, and with luck our Node will be ready with more fruit soon. Our stand has become a center of attention, and so I am distracted, and it is only as I begin to smell *laisi* that I notice among the Elder's group the Hub man from the other day.

Bota is handing the Traveler another fruit. "You may also like this," he says.

Jed takes it, somewhat cautiously; the red, spiky-ball fruit does not immediately advertise itself as edible. "What is it?" he asks.

"A rambutan," Bota says. "Very similar to a lychee, except more like a grape in taste."

He carefully nicks the skin and peels off the hairy mess on the outside, and takes a small bite. "Oh, that's good!" he says. "Hern! Try this!"

The Elders are becoming restless. Bota heads off any unpleasantness by cutting open a durian on the counter. There are groans and grimaces from the stink, until he starts handing out slices. I do not see the *laisi* man. I take a chance and gently tug the sleeve of an Elder beside the green man.

"Honored Elder," I say, when he turns to me. "We had a woman here, Neri, who died several days ago under strange circumstance. I believe it was no accident –"

The Elder smiles and pats my hand. "What else could it have been?"

"There is a man among your group, who –"

The Elder's smile disappears. "This is Utopia," he says. "Such things do not happen here, and it does not become us to accuse others of them." He turns away, and there is no more chance to speak to him, even if I did have more to say. I do not.

The Traveler wipes juice from his fingers onto the leg of his trousers as he turns back to me, then reaches into a pocket in his black and gray jacket and pulls out a small, ornamented metal disk. He hands it to me.

I take it. "It's beautiful. What's it for?"

"It's Beenjai coin."

"Coin?"

"Money. I can't just take your fruit without giving you something," he explains. "Though I suppose you have no way to spend it. It represents a value in water store."

I understand now, and smile as I set the coin back down. "We don't sell our fruit," I say. "We share it." I hold my hand up

and gesture up and down the corridor. "Everything here is for sharing. The Apparatus provides free, why should we seek to do any less? Utopia was founded on the truth that with adequate technology, cooperation supersedes competition."

The green man is shaking his head. "So in this entire fantastic bazaar-in-space, no one will sell me anything? I've been to many Utopias, but this may be the strangest."

"Many Utopias?"

"Utopia is a common settlement name, along with Heaven and Freedom. Few live up to them. There's also a lot of Hells, but they're far more likely to suit it."

"Oh," I say. The idea is disconcerting.

Before I can ask more about it, he puts two more of his coin on my counter. "These may have no value here, but if you find them attractive, consider them yours."

One of the other Elders reaches over and picks up the coins. "Thank you," he says. "Utopia appreciates your gift."

"I gave those to the boy," Jed says.

"Everything here belongs to all citizens. The fruit did not belong to him – his task is to share the fruit, and also gain and share his expertise in it to the benefit of all," the Elder says. "He is merely an apprentice. Would you like to see some of our textiles? We are always interested in raw materials and unique goods, in the matter of equitable trade."

The two green men exchange looks. "Oh yes, please show me!" Hern announces, and starts walking away from the stand. The Elders and their entourage crowd around him as he asks loud questions, pointing ahead.

"I feel I must give you something," Jed says to me as the group begins to thin, not yet realizing he's not following. "They'll just take it away from you, though, I gather?"

I nod.

Bota is there again, at my elbow. He bows low. "There is something you can do for the boy."

"Name it."

"Take him with you."

"What? Bota, no!" I turn at his words, words that make no sense. The green man seems equally startled.

"Echa is naive but smart, and he works hard. I have never heard a cross word or complaint from him," Bota says. "Also, he's a wonderful storyteller. Please, he is like a son to me. For his sake as well as my own, take him away from this place."

"I –" Jed starts, clearly seeking a polite way to refuse. He does not get the chance; the trailing end of the Elders' entourage has now noticed him still at the stand. The *laisi* Hub man appears at the green man's side, and frowns at us. "I haven't forgotten you," he says to Bota.

Bota bows, and hands him a single fruit. "Nor I you," he says. "Please, this is for you." It is a nectarine.

"I will not have any more of your fruit, old man!" The Hub man knocks the nectarine from Bota's hand to the floor.

"Hey!" Jed says, taking a half-step away from the man. "There's no call for that. He was only offering you a gift."

"His 'gifts' are as worthless as he and his apprentice," the Hub man says, gently putting his arm on Jed's elbow and trying to guide him away. "Please, come along, and we will show you the *finer* things Utopia has to offer."

"He'll meet you tonight, before you leave," Bota says.

"I can't –" Jed says, but the look he gives the Hub man suggests he's not entirely unswayed. Before more can be said, the Hub man has pulled him away and they are lost in the crowd.

"Bota, I will not go," I say. "Neri was alone and she's dead. If I am gone, who is to keep you safe?"

He laughs and hugs me, as he has not done since I was much younger. "You can't keep me safe, Echa, but I love you for thinking you could. A terrible thing is coming. I have never been able to see the shape of it, but I know it is close now. And I will see to it that *you* are safe."

"By sending me with the green men? We know nothing about them! What if they are Faithers? Or slavers or cannibals?"

"Photosynthesizing cannibals? Do you think that likely?"

"I don't care, I won't go!" I realize with some shame that I'm yelling. I haven't yelled since the day my father told me my mother had died, and that he was giving me away. I never thought it would happen to me again.

Bota closes his eyes for a moment. "Echa, when you first came here, you used to tell wonderful stories, all about adventures in far-off, magical places. Why did you stop?"

"Because it doesn't matter what I want to do, this is what I was asked to do. This is my place."

"As much as I enjoy your company and appreciate your help, this is not and has never been your place," he says. "I chose you, all those years ago, not for this life but for the life you have to come – a life I hope is filled with your stories, once you have learned to forgive yourself. There's nothing more to be said. Now, we are almost out of fruit again. Go ask more of the Node, while I tidy up and deal with the remains of this crowd."

I do as he's instructed, my mind reeling. I am barely aware of my own actions as I go to the Node and make my request, then turn and stand and stare at the small tent that has been everything to me for the last four years. I'm not certain that I see it; it is some time before I notice, in my small sleeping alcove on my bunk, that Bota has packed my stuff. He has not been back here since before the Travelers arrived, long before he made such an awful request of them. Another of his visions of the future, then.

Next to my small, worn, dusty bag is a clementine.

Heartbreak.

I sit on my bunk, unfasten the loop that holds back my privacy curtains, and let them fall. Because I am angry at him, because I am ashamed, I don't want Bota to see me crying. I hold the clementine in my lap, then slowly peel and eat it, fat tear drops falling down onto my hands and my lap. It is, as always, sweet, and for a moment I hate it for that.

The sounds of arguing bring me back to myself. I'm not sure how long I'd sat there lost in my sadness but I can no longer hear the background hum and babble of the market outside, and the light I can see under the sway of the curtains is slightly more orange, well into the evening lighting shift.

I am rising, my hand already moving my curtain aside, when Bota tumbles to the floor in front of me. He looks at me, his eyes wide, blood on his face, and shakes his head. I let the curtain fall back, the smallest crack left where I can see. The Hub man comes in, and in his hand is a metal bar. The scent of *laisi* fills our tent.

In my heart, I know that what happened to Neri is about

to happen to Bota. I also know that Bota saw this coming, knows what is going to happen, wants me not to die with him. It breaks me to stand there silent and do nothing, but there is nothing I can do. The Hub man hits Bota with the bar, on his back and on his legs. Bota is weeping, curled up in pain. He is not looking towards me anymore. "You idiot," the Hub man says, and spits the words down. "You knew I'd be coming for you, and still you taunt me again this afternoon, in front of the Elders? I'm going to be one of them some day. How dare you even *speak* to me again?"

Bota opens his mouth, manages to find the words. "Utopia," he says. His voice is raspy, and I can hear his breathing, loud and uneven. "All equals. It's important."

"Who believes that?!" the Hub man shouts.

"Echa does," Bota says. The man hits him more, and he cries out. I desperately hope our neighbors can hear, come help, before it is too late. There is nothing in my small alcove I could use to block his attacks, no way to get Bota away.

I don't think Bota can walk. I don't think I can carry him, no matter how much I want to.

The Hub man raises his bar again. The Node chimes.

"What's that?" he demands.

"N-Node," Bota says. "Fruit ready."

The Hub man disappears from my line of sight. I reach for the curtain, thinking to leap out and try to save Bota, but the man reappears before I can. The tray from our Apparatus Node is held in his hands, his bar laid across the top of it.

He sets the tray down beside Bota on the floor and picks up an apple, looking at it curiously in the light. "What's this coating?" he asks.

"Clone membrane shell. From the making."

"How do I get it off?"

"Squeeze. With hands. It crumbles."

The man does, and the shell breaks and falls away. He takes a bite from the apple – a Colonel Yate – then lets it fall from his hand down on top of Bota's body. He picks up another. "This one's tasty," he says. "What is it, fruit-sharer?"

"A Forelle."

"Ah." He drops the pear, the single bite-mark an assault on its perfect orange-yellow skin, on Bota too. Were I not in fear for Bota's life and at dire risk of my own, just the waste, the refusal of all that Utopia means, would have left me screaming in anger. The Hub man works his way across the tray, dropping each after a single bite. Then he picks up another and my heart stops.

"Now this is different," he says, as if having a genial conversation with a colleague, not sitting beside an old man he has beaten near to death. "What is it?"

And Bota has that faraway look in his eyes again. "A pomelo," he says.

"What does it taste like?"

"I don't know. Neither will you."

"Are you mocking me?" the Hub man asks. He stands up, picks up his bar, and hits Bota again and again, the shell around the pomelo shattering in the grasp of his other hand.

Bota's eyes see nothing. I cannot hear his breathing any longer. My own is loud in my ears, cut by the sobs I hold back. The Hub man sits again, either unaware he is now alone in the

room, or not caring. He takes a knife out and cuts through the thick rind into the pomelo, staring curiously at the interior before sticking his knife in and roughly carving out a slice.

Then he jumps up, dropping pomelo and knife. "Stars!" he exclaims.

Something is moving on the floor, something small and black and multi-legged. As I watch, another emerges from the cut-open corpse of the pomelo. "Eeaugh!" the man exclaims, and bends down to poke at it with the bloodied end of his metal bar.

I see it jump and land on the hand holding the bar. He screams, dropping the bar, and slaps at it. Moving away from the pomelo, he comes closer to the curtain and I can see the black shape embedded in the skin of his hand, sinking further in even as he tries to pry it free, first with his fingernails, then with his knife retrieved from the floor.

Blood joins pomelo pulp atop Bota's sightless body.

The Hub man is still shrieking, and I see that another black shape has gotten to his leg and is also sinking in. His hand appears to be swelling, bluish-purple lines spreading out from the original epicenter, and in fear and anger he kicks the pomelo towards the back of the tent, splitting it open. More black shapes tumble out and scatter. He is swaying, unsteady on his feet now, and stumbles away from my curtain.

Falling to his knees, he holds up his hand and I see his entire arm is pulsing, as if things move just beneath the skin. He cries out again, and I see the blue lines have extended up his neck, encroaching on his distorted, wild-eyed face.

He falls across Bota's body, and writhes for a bit, then stops moving. His mouth is hanging open, and I can see many somethings moving within. Others of the black shapes are inching across the floor, like giant black static on the carpet, out in all directions. I fling open my curtain and run out of the tent, vaulting over the stand out into the corridor, imagining a swarm of the things on my heels.

From his tent, I see Omo peering fearfully out. When he sees me, he draws his curtains quickly closed. From the corner of my eye, I catch a similar movement across the way.

And then I know: they heard. They all heard the Hub man beating and killing Bota, and no one did anything. No one came to help him.

I run.

My small pack is in my hand; I don't remember grabbing it, but I turn it over and over, making sure it's clean as I careen through the quiescent market, no direction in mind, no thoughts about what I will do when I run out of places to run.

It is more than just a physical shock when I am stopped dead in my tracks, slamming into something I did not see in my flight and knocking me towards the floor.

Green hands reach out and catch me. "Careful!" a voice says, and I realize that it was the Beenjaier, Jed, I ran into. We are just outside the docks beside our customs gate. "Oh, you're the fruit-seller's apprentice," he says. "Echa, right?"

I point back towards my stand, but words have deserted me.

"Slow down, breathe," the green man says. "What happened?"

"The *laisi* man killed Bota! Then some things got on him, into his skin -" The words come out in a torrent.

"What things? What did they look like?"

"Little black spots with legs. They came from inside the pom-

elo's rind. He killed Bota," I repeat. "He kept hitting him."

Hern was approaching, two of our Elders with him each carrying boxes. "Jed!" he calls. He is smiling. "Trade finished, get your goods and let's get out of here."

"Hold for a moment," Jed calls back. He crouches down beside me and pulls a small screen from his pocket, presses on it, then shows me an image. "Was this it?"

"Yes, exactly that!"

"Shit." He spins me around, patting down my clothes, examining me thoroughly. "Did any get on you? Did you feel any stings? Roll up your sleeves."

"No, not on me," I say, complying.

"Hern, I need your wand," Jed says.

Smile vanishing, his partner reaches into a pocket and hands him a small oblong device, which he waves carefully up and down my body, front and back. "You're clean," he says at last. "Tell me what happened."

"It ate into his hand when he cut open the pomelo, and then it was like there were hundreds of them, moving up his arm and into his head, and then they were in his mouth," I said. I close my eyes for a moment, as if to shut out that horror. "No one came."

"They're about to hatch? How long were you with him?"

"It was only a few minutes. Maybe five or six."

"Wait - minutes? From when he got infected?"

"Yes."

"Triple shit." He stands up. "We have to get out of here. It should take most of a day for the spore-ticks to lifecycle."

"They were in the pomelo, so they were in the pomelo pattern," I say. After all these years I knew what Bota was afraid of, but he'd never lived to see it himself. "The Apparatus enhances things, but it's not smart. If the original pomelo had these ticks in it, it would have made them better too."

"Hern, we have to go," he says. Hern is watching in confusion, the Elders frowning. "Leave everything here. If you have any fruit, toss it now."

"What?"

"Spore-ticks." He turns to the Elders. "If you want to save the rest of your people, you need to lock down your station and vent everything within a thousand meters of the fruit stand into space."

He turns to me. "You're clean. Your Elders can take you to some other part of the station. They'll take care of you."

I look at the Elders, and I know those expressions. "They won't," I say. "Not on your word, nor mine."

The Elder nearest me reaches for my arm and takes hold of me, gently but firmly. "The boy is known for his imagination," the Elder says. "He was placed with the fruit-seller to try to wean him of his need to tell fantasies, but clearly Bota is not up to the task. I assure you, there is nothing here to worry about. Utopia is safe."

"I'm not making this up!" I shout. I turn a pleading look on Jed and Hern. "They'll wait until they see it for themselves, and then it'll be too late."

"There's nothing we can do, kid," Hern says. He is piling up his goods as quickly as he can on a small rolling skid, wanding each one.

The Elder looks smug, as if he's foiled a prank, as if all that's

left is for me to admit my lie and let life go back to normal. Bota is dead, and the Hub man too, and how many others will follow before that expression will change? Before anyone comes out of hiding and acts?

There is the sound of distant commotion and consternation, down towards the fruit stand. The Elder holding my arm turns, without letting go, and gestures. "Honored Jhumo, would you please go find fruit-seller Bota and bring him here? We need to have a discussion about the boy's keeping."

"Certainly, Honored Amu," the other Elder says, and tucking his hands in his sleeves walks into the Rimside.

"How long will it take them to spread this far?" I ask Jed.

He was watching the Elder, and now turns to me. "It depends on how many people there are to slow them down," he says.

"There are a lot of people."

"Each spore-tick can hatch hundreds of spawn," he says. "They will grow exponentially in number and speed. Radiation won't stop them, nor chemicals, nor starvation – they just go dormant inside something until it's safe to emerge again. Only vacuum will kill them, and even that...takes some time."

I understand many things at once. I dare to put out my free hand and put it over the hand of the Elder on my arm, and as he jerks his hand away I pull off his ring. Leaping up onto the customs desk, I run the length of it to where it meets the wall, and the Node there.

"Boy, what are you doing?" the Elder shouts. "Get down from there! Give that back!"

I open the glass doors in front of the Node, and place my hand against the palm circle. The Apparatus knows me. "There's an emergency," I tell it. "Please close the blast doors at Arc 17 and Arc 19."

"Authorization?" the Node asks. I had never heard it speak before.

"Stop!" the Elder shouts. He has picked up the hem of his

robe and is running towards me now. "You've taken this too far!"

Authorization? I slip the ring onto my own hand, enormous on my thin fingers, and press it again against the circle.

There is screaming from down near the fruit stand. First one, then several voices. One sounds like Elder Jhumo.

The Node flashes green.

There is a groan, and a grinding sound, and then alarms as heavy bulkhead doors, hidden and half-forgotten, emerge from the walls, tearing through tapestries and chewing up rugs as they march across the whole of Rimside's diameter, like teeth slowly biting together. People near the edge shout and leap out; I turn my head away as a woman, tears streaming down her face, runs towards us with an infant held tight against her chest. I had given her blackberries just a few days before.

"Hern! Use your wand! Save as many as you can!"

The traveler runs forward, passes the wand over mother and child, then reaches in and pulls them through. People are running towards us now, the crowd growing quickly, and the sounds of panic are not enough to mask the growing sounds of terror and death behind them.

We pull through another eleven, only that, and then the doors close.

I stare at my hand, still in the palm circle. "Evacuate Arc 18," I say, though it is barely more than a whisper.

The sound, through the doors, is terrible, and brief.

"What have you done?" the Elder says again. His face is ashen, his eyes wide, his whole body trembling. "Those people..."

Hern is scanning the last person through.

"He's saved the rest of your station," Jed says.

"He's just killed hundreds! Hundreds of people!" the Elder shouts.

I take my hand from the circle, let the ring drop from my finger onto the floor. Jed reaches up and grabs my free hand,

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pulling me down. "I think your fruit-seller was right," he says, his voice gentle. "You're going to have to come with us. If you want to?"

"Please," I say, and then he's pulling me along, pushing past the stunned Elder. Hern is right behind us with his skid.

We break into a run, and go through the thick, circular air lock and into a small chamber bathed in blue light.

Just like that, we're on a ship. An actual space ship.

I've dreamed of this much of my short life, but now I am too tired and broken to think. Everything is metal and monotone; no fabrics covering the walls, no bright colors and lights, no bustle of people or smells of fruit and food and drink. It is alien and cold.

Hern is looking at an instrument panel. "We're clean," he says, and presses a button, and the blue is replaced by normal light. He turns to us, looks at me with pity in his eyes. "Now what?"

"Get us out of here," Jed says. "When we're at the edge of their territory, before we hit jump, drop a quarantine beacon. Ships could pick up those spore-tick coming through here for months before it's safe."

"And then what?" Hern says. "What do we do with him?"

"My sister and her wife will look after him. They're always taking in strays. And this one just saved our lives, and the lives of nearly everyone on that station, even if they don't realize it."

Hern shakes his head, and leaves the chamber, leaving the door open behind him. "Look, Echa," Jed says. "I know you've just been through a lot, but Hern and I need to get us free of the station. Beenjai is very different from Utopia – it's a planet, have you ever been to one?"

I shake my head, numbly.

"I think you'll like it there, once you get used to the sky. I have to go help Hern now. The bridge is just up that way, if you want to join us." He points. "Take whatever time you need, just

please don't touch anything. Okay?"

"Okay," I say, though I feel far from it.

"You did the right thing," he says, and then he leaves me, and I'm alone there.

I don't understand how my life could have been so slow and the same for so long, and then in moments everything is different. Gone. Bota, the fruit stand, Chema and Nai, Neri and Omo. I never did get new shoes. How many others were dead too, people that I served every day?

My life was gone, and a new one would begin, someday, in a strange place, among strangers. *Once you have learned to forgive yourself*, Bota had said. Bota always saw too much, and never quite enough.

I sit with my knees tight against my chest, my arms wrapped around my legs. My pack is on the floor, me and it all that will be left of Utopia soon. I can see through the half-closed top the shape of my reader and a large brown packet I don't recognize. Reaching out, I pull it from my pack and look inside.

Seeds. Fruit seeds, all different kinds, prepared and packed for a journey by Bota's careful hand.

Not everything is gone, after all. I carry the things I love most about my home, in these seeds. Utopia – the best parts of it, the parts I thought were a reflection of the whole until the Hub man came to visit – lives and breathes and sings in my heart. There are stories I will tell about them, magical, hopeful stories about the Utopia that could have been, but was not.

I put my head down on my knees and close my eyes, and I remember, and I cry. The stars, and the future, can wait a little longer.

Suzanne Palmer is a writer and artist whose previous work has appeared in *Asimov's*, *Interzone*, and our sister magazine *Black Static*. She lives in western Massachusetts, where winter appears to have gone missing this year, and she wonders if us folks in the UK happen to have seen it.

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JACOB A. BOYD

BOUND IN PLACE

UNTIL DERRICK'S FACE BRIGHTENED AT THE REALTOR'S suggestion, Jolene had considered haunted houses non-options, no matter how *in* they were. Derrick had made promises. They would not make a life where people had died. Also, she would not have to work a day in her life, and she would be envied for how much she was loved. The realtor's photo of the large Victorian set on a hilltop upset Jolene. The noontime shadow from its widow's walk starkly divided its baroque front door and made her insides itch. But Jolene had made promises, too, promises of fidelity, flexibility, and love. Compromise seemed fair. Though the hulking Victorian looked murderous, the ghosts inhabiting it were not those of people who had died there. They had been imported.

"The ghosts," Jolene asked the realtor, in whose downtown office she and Derrick sat, "they'll do everything?"

"Within reason," the realtor said. He was a bluff man named Sterling. "You'll never have to clean up after yourself or fix a meal. You'll never touch an appliance again. The house comes with a Healthy Home incantation manual. You read a passage aloud, and things get done. Once you settle into a rhythm, you don't even have to do that. Just scribble one of the binding wards on a wall, and the ghosts oblige."



When Derrick had proposed to Jolene, his parents said they would cover the down payment on whatever home she and Derrick chose. They were wealthy. Derrick was their only son. They told Jolene she was like a daughter to them. Such generosity and emotion made Jolene wither with shyness. Derrick was not as wealthy as his parents. Not yet. But he was on track career-wise. His firm was moving them to a new city. While the projected monthly payments for the Victorian would strain their newlywed finances, Derrick was industrious; hard work made him happy. For him, Jolene saw that it was like a challenge.

"It has a pool," Derrick said. "You said you wanted a pool."

"The house is rather big," Jolene said.

"It won't feel that way," Sterling said. He grinned in a way that made Jolene think that he practised before a mirror.

"It would take a decade before I could give you anything like it even close to the city," Derrick said. "It's beautiful. We're lucky the bank repossession put it within our reach."

Jolene scrunched her nose, then cringed – she knew Derrick could read her signal that she was caving.

"It's not that far from the city," Derrick said. "You'll meet new people. You can entertain on the weekends."

"If nothing else," Sterling added, "it's a great investment. Zero energy bills."

"Why did the bank repossess it?" Jolene asked.

"I know as much as you do about that," Sterling said. "I showed you the listing as soon as it crossed my desk."

Site unseen, Derrick made an offer. His spontaneity had always made Jolene feel confident, like he foresaw a way to success, to happiness – perhaps he got it from his parents – but she had her doubts. Still, she did not feel like she could object without seeming ungrateful and derailing Derrick's enthusiasm for their new life together. It was a gift.

The bank accepted his offer.

GHOSTS ROAM THE wide halls and large empty rooms of the Victorian on the hilltop. Their memories are so perishingly short that the place seems to unfold into new rooms without end. They pass each other and exchange quiet nods, neither knowing whether they had met before nor caring. How many ghosts crowd the house, none of them know.

At times, light suffuses the place. At other times, it dims to blackness. Dust accumulates. To the ghosts, these things seem like important clues, but the moment they realize what the clues indicate, they forget and notice the clues anew.

They never rest or have need to.

The walls and floors and ceilings of the place remain impenetrable. Indeed, even in some places where no walls stand, like at the end of the driveway or where the grounds near the pool give way to shrubs lined with carved stones, the air is impenetrable, too.

People arrive through the impenetrable air at the end of the driveway, a man and a woman in a large box truck. The ghosts have never met the couple before. They are sure of it. They think it would be different if they had known the couple. The couple are strangers, like the ghosts are to each other. They regard the couple as curiosities.

The man and the woman are impenetrable, yet they move

and react when touched as though they are chilled. With a large leather bound book in their hands, they speak stridently and in such a way that the ghosts remember things: how to get from one place to another within the house, how to become substantial without taking form, and certain acts like lifting boxes and sorting their contents and carefully placing plates and bowls and glasses on cabinet shelves. Then they forget again.

JOLENE DID NOT like it that Derrick could not stay for their housewarming party. The sales firm he worked for, which had covered their relocation costs, had called him away to England. He could not say no. It was a step up for him. He had taken the lead of the team on the Axe-Pullman account. When he landed in Heathrow, Jolene told him she was proud of him over the phone, then returned to the guests who had gathered around the marble-topped island in the center of the Victorian's palatial kitchen.

Those who made it out to the Victorian from the city were Derrick's new friends from work and a couple of his old college buddies. The skyline the Victorian observed from its hilltop was a new view for Jolene, in a new state. She knew Derrick's friends only in passing or by name. Most she met for the first time. She was bad with new names when she had to put them to new faces. Quickly, she realized she could address her guests en masse instead of individually and avoid stubbing her courtesy upon faux pas. They had come for her spectacle, not her company, anyway.

"Who wants a drink?" she asked.

Someone asked for a vodka martini, dry.

Jolene ran her fingertips over the red pebbled leather of the Modern Bartender's incantations tome. Sterling had given it to them as a gift upon handing over the keys. She opened it to vodka, martini, dry, and read aloud. No more than a series of vowels and consonances in a row, the incantation sounded like raving baby-talk nonsense. Her guests giggled uncomfortably, as though she was putting them on. Then the frosted-glass vodka bottle rose from the island as if lifted by an invisible hand, and a martini was made.

Someone said that Derrick must go to the ends of the earth for her, to give her such a home. Jolene agreed, and said that it would be nice, though, if he stuck around once in a while. Her guests laughed.

She was a hit.

The guests wanted more. Because of the show the ghosts made of the cocktail preparations, the guests drank more than they normally would drink. Jolene drank more than she usually drank, too. She showed her guests how there were no light switches in the house, no light bulbs either. Ghosts provided the light. Chilly? Ghosts warmed and cooled the place. They washed and folded laundry, vacuumed, and cooked all the peppered beef canapés and tandoori chicken kebabs arranged on the gleaming platters. With a few lines from her Healthy Home manual, she rearranged the chairs and couches while her guests sat on them. They laughed and called it wild, the wave of the future. Together, they returned to the kitchen for more drinks.

In a low voice, almost lost amongst the mingling crowd, someone said it was disgraceful how she treated the ghosts. Jolene could not tell who had said it. She was livid. They had

come into her home, then flush on her booze and hospitality they had been brazen enough to disparage it? She told everyone to get out.

Not everyone was okay to drive. Jolene ignored the Gourmet Ghost incantations manual someone had brought as a gift and made sloppy ham and Swiss finger sandwiches and brewed coffee with too many grounds for those still tipsy. Soon, she was alone again in the large Victorian.

With her incantations tome, she put out the lights. In the dark, she called Derrick. She reached his voicemail and felt embarrassed that she might be bothering him during a meeting. The time change confused her. On his voicemail, she said she loved him. She felt a nervous tremor in her voice. She hung up. She imagined his phone vibrating in his pocket during a presentation.

THE GHOSTS WATCH the man and the woman argue. The ghosts feel a closeness to the couple. Some sort of sympathy. The man and the woman seem harried, frustrated. The woman speaks about how sorry she is, how she never wished to sabotage the man. The man says it was not her fault. She did not know the people she was hosting and she had no idea upon what standards she would be judged nor how it would affect him. Now, though, he would have to work extra hard to mend relationships, prove his worth. These seem like clues to something. The clues seem important, though only briefly. The ghosts forget them.

The man is there sometimes. Then he is not. The woman is there. Again and again.

The woman reads from a stack of leather bound tomes in such a way that the ghosts remember things: how to skim debris from the pool, how to warm blankets at night, how to move water through pipes. She does not seem to want to do anything for herself. The ghosts clean windows, dust cabinet faces, suffuse the place with light.

The woman writes directions on the walls that make sense to the ghosts. They are constantly busy. The house is noisy with their work, endlessly cleaning clean surfaces, fixing and cleaning up after meals.

In a frenzy, the woman scrubs away all the directions and sits in silence. Then in the dark.

The woman leaves through the impenetrable air at the end of the driveway.

Light that is not the ghosts' own suffuses the place, then darkness. Dust accumulates. Food spoils.

The woman returns. She wears the same clothes she had left wearing. She is quiet and darts about the house. The ghosts find her stationed by the pool. She drinks from a frosted-glass bottle. When darkness suffuses the place, she shivers, curls up on a deck chair, her wide eyes staring at the large, clear windows of the Victorian. The light from the moon shines off them. Her mouth opens and closes without meaning. Her hands clench and relax.

JOLENE WAS STARTLED by the sound of a car coming down the driveway and considered hiding. She had not bathed in days. She had not gone inside. She had urinated in the bushes nearby, and they stank. She felt bloated and hungry. Even as a cloud

passed overhead, her sunburn radiated heat, beet-red.

A woman's voice called out – Derrick's mother, a reserved, gray-haired matron whose eyes had always made Jolene fidget. She knocked on the front door, then her heel clicks followed the paving stones around the Victorian toward the pool, where Jolene lay on a deck chair.

"Oh, child," she said. She placed a hand over her heart.

"I'm sorry," Jolene said.

Derrick's mother led Jolene from the deck chair toward the rear entrance of the Victorian. At the threshold, Jolene resisted her guidance.

"I understand that you're lonely," Derrick's mother said. "I'm married to a successful man, too. But this is no way..."

Jolene cried on Derrick's mother's shoulder and stepped into the house.

"It's so dark," Derrick's mother said. "What's the saying for lights?"

Jolene said it. She did not need the tomes. She knew many of the incantations. After saying them once, she could not forget them, could not shake them. Ghostly light suffused the place.

In her bathing suit, Jolene sat in a tub half-full of cool water while Derrick's mother rubbed lotion onto her sunburn. Jolene winced from the soothing sting of it and breathed in the heady eucalyptus vapors.

"I'm going to give you something," Derrick's mother said, and produced a bottle of pills from her shoulder bag. "For your nerves."

Jolene took the bottle. "The ghosts were people," she said.

"Everyone is people, child. But if they're not put to use, they can feel rather useless. Derrick's father, for example, has his work. Without it, he'd crack up. I, on the other hand, have Derrick and you."

"What about eternal rest?" Jolene asked.

"That hokum? Once this sunburn fades, you need to get out more. You'll promise me, won't you? You'll get out and find ways to keep busy? When Derrick gets back from Istanbul, maybe you can work on a grandchild."

Jolene hugged Derrick's mother with a sudden intensity. Her fingers dug into Derrick's mother's meaty shoulders. "I don't mean to be a bother."

"No, child, you could never be a bother to me."

THE GHOSTS BECOME busy again, though often they leave tasks half-finished as one job is cut off for another. Often, too, they break bowls or spill milk or mix paint colors again and again until the various buckets are filled with gray or brown. Then they have to fix what they have done. Sometimes, it is impossible. Some things cannot be undone.

The woman slurs her words. She does not speak stridently, and mispronounces things so that the ghosts are confused. Things get misplaced. The woman roams the house looking for them. The ghosts find the woman sitting on the end of the widow's walk, observing the city skyline through the haze, her bare feet dangling over the edge. The ghosts find the woman swimming laps in the blue-tiled pool. The ghosts find the woman on the phone, a half-empty pill bottle in her lap. She tells someone that he should not worry. She is getting along swimmingly. No, she has not made any new friends, but it will take time, right?

She is willing to wait. His mother has been so nice, and he is doing everything he had ever promised. She is so happy. The days are just rushing by. She cannot wait to be with him.

When she rings off with him, she calls someone else and arranges a meeting.

The woman leaves and returns through the impenetrable air at the end of the driveway. The man she brings with her grins at the ghosts in a bluff way that they find familiar. It is as though he can see them. The man shows the woman the carved stones lining the shrubs at the edge of the grounds. The man shows her the location of other various symbols and carvings that had been worked into the landscaping and the designs of the trim, pressed tin ceilings, banisters, carpeting, and wallpaper.

The woman says to the man that there is something she must know: why had the bank originally repossessed her house? The man says that it was nothing special. Happens all the time. The people who had owned it had died. Not on site, but elsewhere, in a hospital – no next of kin. The woman asks where their ghosts are. The man says that they are elsewhere, in another house, one nearer to where they had died. People rarely die at home anymore. The woman says that it is cruel to keep ghosts from the people they love, from everything they know. The ghosts, the man says, can't remember anything long enough to feel anything. They're like fish. They don't feel pain. The woman tells the man to leave.

The ghosts see all this, then forget.

The woman is there.

"I CAN MAKE you warm," Jolene said to Derrick, once he returned from Morocco. "Watch." She slurred the incantation for warmth, and Derrick collapsed from the sudden burst of intense heat. She dropped her highball glass and said the incantation to make the ghosts stop. Derrick rose, looked into Jolene's wide, watery eyes, and slapped her.

"Pull it together," he said. "You could hurt someone."

Jolene held her palm to the cheek he had struck. "Hold me," she said.

He hugged her. "It won't be for that long," he said. "I'll come back to you. I always come back to you."

"I know," she said.

"You're taking the pills?"

Jolene looked at Derrick as though surprised he knew, then figured she should have known he and his mother would confer on the right course of action to take with her.

"I've stopped," she said. "I was afraid that if we tried for a baby, they might do something to it. Afraid that I might not be able to get off of them."

"Take them," he said. "It's okay to take them."

"Okay."

"All this work I do," he said, "it's for you. For us."

"I can make you warm," she said.

"I know," he said.

THE GHOSTS WATCH the woman wave to the man as he leaves through the impenetrable air at the end of the driveway. They watch the woman pace the rim of the swimming pool. They watch her dig up one of the carved stones lining the shrubs where the grounds end.

The air there is no longer impenetrable.

One by one, the ghosts press through the opening. On the other side, their memories suddenly deepened, to a time before the Victorian. They remembered things: family and love and life. They remembered things for ten seconds, then twenty, then forty, and so on.

They looked back toward where they had come from. A high, black box rose into the gray night sky. It gave them the chills, as if it had once filled the horrible cavity shape in their memories. A narrow chink in its surface glowed and dimmed, glowed and dimmed. The ghosts peered through the chink and saw a woman they could not remember from their lives. She spoke in such a way that the ghosts still inside the box lit and unlit the pool as if dumbly compelled. They did not know who the woman was, had never met her. They were sure of it. She emptied a pill bottle into her mouth and swam until her words no longer lit the pool, then sank under the surface.

Once the ghosts turned away, they forgot what they had seen, and faced a world they remembered, but that had changed.

WITH A SOLEMN air, Sterling showed Derrick why the lights would not come on, why the pipes would not flush, why dust accumulated. A carved stone had been uprooted from its incantation barrier along the shrub line where the grounds ended. He replaced the stone for Derrick and told him to try an incantation again.

Derrick said an incantation for light, but it did not work.

"They must be gone," Sterling said. "Every last one escaped."

Derrick looked the incantation over again. "Jolene," he said, "I love you." He read the light incantation aloud.

Light suffused the place.

Sterling grinned. "She stayed," he said, his voice catching in his throat. "And she seems to remember you."

Derrick ran his fingers over the tan pebbled leather of the Healthy Home incantations manual as if touching Jolene's skin.

"You're in sales, right?" Sterling asked.

"Yes," Derrick said, puzzled.

"Perhaps we could arrange a partnership."

"A partnership?"

"You man the house and show prospective clients how the ghosts are loved and how they love in return, and we promote it as our flagship. In return, your mortgage payments vanish, and you make salary."

Derrick looked at the walls and floor and ceiling, as if he would find Jolene there. His brow tightened and tears glazed his eyes.

"It'd be hard work," Sterling said, "with long hours. But you'd be with family."

"You're sure it's her?" Derrick asked.

Sterling grinned. "I'm positive."

Jacob A. Boyd lives in Eugene, Oregon, with his wife and two Dobermans, where he helps run a non-profit theatre with a growing circle of friends. His fiction has appeared in various fine publications, including *Daily Science Fiction*, *Cosmos Magazine*, and *ChiZine*. To keep up on his forthcoming work, visit his website at jacobaboyd.wordpress.com, where you'll find links to his previously published material as well as links to videos of his stage work.

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Martin McGrath is taking a break as poll overseer for health reasons, but will return to the role next year. We wish him a full and speedy recovery. Please use one of the methods below to send us your votes.

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The results will be published in issue #240, so please make sure your votes are in before March 31st.

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Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise

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Flock, Shoal, Herd

James Bloomer

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Omega

cover art by Richard Wagner

The Silver Wind

Once again we're asking you to let us know what you enjoyed (and what you didn't) during the previous year. You may vote for and against any number of stories or artworks published in issues #232 to #237 inclusive (we publish a list of eligible works here to help remind you). You don't have to have read every issue in order to cast a vote.

As always, we're as keen to hear your opinions of the magazine as we are to get your votes, so don't be shy in letting us know what you think, or post your comments to the forum.

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RAIL RIDERS

MATTHEW COOK

WE ALL HAD THINGS WE WERE RUNNING TO, OR FROM.

For Jewel, it was a dead baby and a wicked jag habit back on Prospero. Wasn't her fault; nothing else matters when you're stoned on jag, or so she says. It's hard to remember little things – *important* things, like taking care of a little, defenseless one – when you're flying so high on chemical wings.

Claire had herself a husband back on some armpit miner's colony around New Athens. When money was tight he'd sell her for twenty chits a pop, then beat her for being a whore. When she'd finally had enough of that she waited until he was asleep, then cut him, bad, with a chunk of steel strap banding. She headed out into the black without a backward look and has been riding the rails ever since.

Dag said he was a singer on Mars, Sol-wise, before his voice gave out, on account of all the screaming he did in the name of music. Too much smoke in too many

clubs. Too many decibels that left a ringing in his ears that won't ever go away.

Then the final straw: his eyesight gone after he drank a bad batch of grain 'shine, bought from another railrider. Jewel liked his skinny body and felt sorry for him besides, so she took him in. She's watched over him ever since.

Daisy turned tricks on Lagos for a hermaphrodite named Blossom. Ammee (sweet, unlucky Ammee) ran away from her mother and her abusive pervert sick fuck of a stepfather, a story as tired and played-out as Old Earth itself.

And me...well. The less said about me the better.

All of us, riding the rails and looking for a home. All of us thankful for every clean, oxygenated breath. All of us drinking and screwing and eating on occasion and sleeping when we could, and always...*always*...looking out for the bulls.

What a way to live.

Jewel asked me one time, what did I do before I rode the rails? Like it matters. Like she cared. Maybe she did. Does. I forgave her for asking the question.

A long time ago, years and years I think, I did what normal girls do. Went to school. Complained about my boyfriend or my girlfriend (whichever one I had at the moment) and about my crappy hourly job. Drank cheap beer until I was weepy drunk, then cried to the equally clueless strangers I considered friends about how cruel and mean and unfair the big, bad universe is.

The person I am now would *destroy* that poor-mouthed *cho san ba*. Would break her back. Would use the coiled steel cobra in my bag across her pretty mouth and knock her down on her ass and root through her shit. I'd take what I wanted without regret, while she blubbered through the shards and stubs of her broken teeth.

Riding the rails. Sounds romantic, if you've never done it. After the first time someone you know ends up dead, frozen in some airless steel box, well... Let me tell you, the romance, it goes away. Fast. Hard to be nostalgic when you're looking down at a deader, foamy-mouthed from overdose. Or when you're huddled in a portside dumpster, hiding from a would-be pimp or trafficker.

None of us would do it if we had any other choice. Every world in the Concordance has people like us. People who fear the rails less than whatever it is they're running from.

Back on Old Earth, they called us lots of things. Hobos. Hip-pies. Gutter Punks. Railriders. Wandering trash, rootless and adrift, looking for that next town. That next job, or scam. Looking for freedom, whatever you chose to stick that label to, usually at the cost of our health and sanity.

Railriding ain't legal, but those who do it are still supposed to have some rights. Supposed to. We're not vermin; we're people. According to Concordance law, a ship captain has to give stow-aways 'adequate life support and access to minimal nutrition, hydration and sanitation facilities until the ship makes plan-*etfall*'.

That means air and water and food and heat, if the words were too big for you. That means that the captain's supposed to turn you over alive at journey's end, not shove you out the 'lock in the middle of the black. That's the law. I've read it; I know.

But that doesn't mean that accidents don't happen.

Easier to 'forget' to check the cargo hold before powering it down to minimal spacing conditions, especially when you find a pack of smelly, unwashed railriders camping between the cargo modules in the hammocks we all learn to make out of plastic d-ring grids and strapping tape. Lots cheaper to reduce the heat to only a few degrees over absolute, if the cargo can take it, than leave it running at a civilized 12-*cee* for a month.

We all know the stories, the ones about holds full of icy-stiff railriders, hanging like frozen fruit in their hammocks. Oops, so sorry, but how were we supposed to know that anyone was down there? Sensors must've malfunctioned. Too bad, so sad. These things happen, more than you probably want to think about.

Fucking captains. Fucking shipping companies and the bulls they hire to make our lives miserable. None of us would do what we do if yadda yadda, blah blah blah.

So there we all are, Daisy and Dag and Claire and Ammee, with Jewel and me as what passes for parents I suppose, riding the rails between Murtaugh-Shev-Wollenski and New Kath-mandu. The block we've found this time is choice: a livestock berth. Livestock means lots of piss and heaping towers of low-grav shit, but it also means lots of noise and chaos and, above all, guaranteed water and heat. Downside is it also means that someone will probably come to check on the animals during the trip. Decisions, decisions, but not really much of a skull-scratcher in the end.

We sling our hammocks up high, in the corners up between the dusty ducting and water pipes. The bulls know about our hiding places, but they're sometimes lazy, or scared of heights. Gotta hope, right?

One of us always sleeps down on the floor, keeping an eye on the main 'lock. If the bulls come – *when* the bulls come – the lookout will warn us. We'll unsling our hammocks and scatter, hiding in the very-most shadowy corners or buried in hay or even piles of crap until they go away.

Problem is, it's boring down on the floor, with nobody to listen to but the mooing cattle, or antelope, or whatever the fuck's down there eating and shitting all day. Sometimes the watchers fall asleep.

I use a vampire tap to hook into the block's power, then dial up my hot plate real slow, in case someone's actually paying attention up on the bridge and might notice the sudden spike of juice. Cows (or antelope, or whatever) don't use electricity, so we gotta be careful. After a while, I have a pot of water steaming on the plate, balanced on the eighteen-inch truss that frames out the block. Daisy's down on the floor doing 'lock-watch. Everyone else watches the pot with eager eyes.

"Toss in," I say when it's ready.

Hands go into backpacks and satchels, emerging with bruised vegetables and boxes of vac-sealed crackers or bread. Ammee smiles, her hand stuck into her pack, stretching the moment out, obviously happy with what she's got.

"Come on," Dag whispers. "Don't hold out. Whatcha hold-ing?"

She pulls out a foam tray wrapped in plastic. On it is a slab of meat. Real meat. Red and white, marbled with fat and only a little gray around the edges. We bay like dogs, like wolves, slapping her on the back and congratulating her on her find.

"Where the fuckall did you get that, you lucky newbie bitch?" Jewel breathes.

Ammee shrugs. "Some guy. He was throwing stuff out, out back of one of the port hotels. A bit's bad, there on the corner, so he was tossing it I guess. He was nice to me."

We all shut up. I frown. "Ammee," I start.

She nods and sighs. "I know, I know. I'm sorry, OK? But I was so hungry."

"Chick pea, you gotta be careful planetside," Jewel says, all motherly. "Someone that goes out of their way to be nice to you...that should always send up a red flag, baby."

"I know," Ammee repeats. "But, hey, look, it worked out."

"He could've hurt you," Claire says, her voice hard as concrete. "That's what guys do. He might have dragged you off and raped you, even. Or, worse, he could've sold -"

"I'm not some clueless kid, you know!" Ammee shouts, proving the words true just by saying them. "If I wanted assholes telling me what to do all day I would've stayed at home. Didn't I get us meat?"

We all stop talking. Ammee's right. We can't tell anyone else what to do. Too easy to think about all the other people that tried that crap on us, back before we decided to ride the rails.

The meat's a bit gamy, but it makes the soup rich and salty, the best meal most of us have had in a month. I make sure to save Daisy a share, pouring it into a T-ware container that's traveled with me all the way from home.

Looking at the bright green T-ware box, I think of Sam's kitchen. Think about my hands, spattered with blood, rooting through the drawers, looking for God only knows what. I don't know why I chose the plastic container over more useful things. The corkscrew, maybe. Or the old cleaver that Sam said belonged to his Gammy.

Even still, the T-ware has proved useful over the last four years. I shouldn't complain, or think back to my life before. I never meant to ride this long - none of us did - but the rails're hard to get off once you start sliding on them. They're like drugs that way: starting's easy, stopping's not.

I put the container in my pack and settle back into my hammock with my 'reader. Plenty of time to read on the rails. If we were back in the real world, most of us would have college degrees by now I bet, we read so much.

The trip passes that way, reading and sleeping and eating. When the food's gone, we sip water to fill the empty place in our bellies. We have to hide twice, when the caretakers walk through the block, but it's a big ship and they have a lot to do and we all manage to hide.

Dag and Daisy are an item this trip, and they keep us up a lot with the noise they make. Daisy shares Dag with Ammee once or twice, and even offers me a taste, but I tell her no. I'm off sex for a while. The constant dirt and grime means that sometimes I get all oozy and itchy, like I am now. Until I can score some antibiotics, getting a guy into my pants is near the bottom of my list of things I want to do.

Finally, we make 'fall on New Kathmandu, huddling in the block's corners and bracing ourselves against re-entry as best we can. Ammee gets knocked over when the hauler hits a particularly rough patch of 'mo and falls bad on her arm. Daisy checks it out when we're on final approach. It's broken, maybe;

she definitely can't use it right. Every time she tries to stick it out she yelps in pain.

In the port, we crouch near the doors, our stuff all gathered, then when they open, we scurry out. We all grin and breathe deep, reveling in air that doesn't smell like manure and oxy-recycling. We're lucky: it's night, and the darkness helps us all as we run for the outer wire.

Most spaceports are serviced by railroads running between the cities and the huge, open landing fields, flat strips of stone gray studded with mag-lev stacks or even ribbons of shining steel rail, running in parallel on their wooden slat roadways.

New Kathmandu has old-fashioned steel rails, which I like better because the trains move a lot slower. Mag-levs can sometimes get up past 200 k-per, which is brutal fast if you've got to ride on the outside.

We wait, huddled in the weird, purplish bushes beside the tracks, making bets on which train's going to pull out first. When one does, we run out and climb up onto the steel cars, wedging ourselves into the little triangular service platforms at the corners.

I thread my pack straps through the steel ladder rungs. They'll hold me up in case I fall asleep and accidentally try to lean over. We've all heard of people that didn't follow this basic precaution, and got sucked under the wheels for their stupidity.

"We're going east, so that must mean we're headed towards Thamel," Claire shouts. She's been to New Kathmandu before, and knows the layout.

I don't know what kind of place Thamel is, but it's near a spaceport, so it's probably rough. Always lots to do in port towns, though. Plenty of people, spacers with shore leave bonus money in their jumpsuits, to busk from or even to panhandle. Plenty of drug dealers. Plenty of bars and rough trade clubs and shops and sometimes even libraries.

Port towns are two-edged swords though, 'cause they always have an established group of gutter punks and settled-in rail-riders squatting in the best spots. People like that tend to not like newcomers horning in on their action. You gotta be tough, but diplomatic.

Just after dawn, the train slows down near the big yard outside Thamel. We hop off outside the fence; no way we want to be in there, under the watchful eyes up in the traffic control tower, unable to escape the bulls. We spend the morning walking along the miles of steel fencing that protects the yard, ducking into the bushes when we hear the growl of a bull-truck headed our way.

It's afternoon by the time we reach the inner part of the city and split. We know we'll find each other later on. We always do. A place like Thamel isn't big enough to really disappear in, not like a proper city like Og or Neo Roma.

I stick with Ammee, and Dag goes with Daisy. Jewel's worried. She doesn't like the idea of Dag out in town with Daisy, where he might be run over by a bus or something, but lets him go after reminding Daisy about a hundred times to keep an eye out for him.

I remember something about New Kathmandu being a world that was settled by Buddhists, or militant Nepalese Hindus or something, which I guess explains all the strings of colorful banners strung across the streets. Lots of signs in pretty, curly

letters that Ammee tells me is Sanskrit. Lots of little statues of chubby gods sitting in candle-lit shrines tucked away in odd places. It seems weird to me that people would come all the way from Old Earth, the place they got kicked out of, only to transplant all that crap here. I wonder if Buddha or Vishnu or Whoever the people of New Kathmandu worship knows these people are even out here.

Ammee and I raid some trash bins behind a grocery mart, emerging with flat loaves of three-day old naan and a foam tray with some moldy cheese 'wrapped to it. The bread's stale but not-too, and the cheese is nice and yellow under the green fuzz. Fine dining by railrider standards.

Bellies fullish, we go to find the closest library, just as the fat, gray clouds overhead decide to start pissing on our heads. I decide that I like it out here on the rims of the Concordance; they still bother with things like libraries. This one may even have books in it. Like, on paper. Closer corewards, everyone just has their books and stories read to them by the AI in their eye-phones or their 'readers.

We find the library, a small, cinderblock box full of shared 'net terminals and grubby, half-washed patrons. Most of them are probably looking for day-work, using the terminals to scour job boards, but some are just loafing around, reading. I see a green-haired gutterpunk near the back door reading an actual book, and smile.

You can't sleep in the library, that's a rule, but you can sit as long as you're reading. No problem for a railrider. We find chairs near the windows and watch the rain. Ammee finds some printed fiction, the hardboiled crime lab detective stuff she likes, while I hook my 'reader up to the public 'net and get caught up with the news.

New Kathmandu may have been settled by religious folk, but they have the same crime issues as anywhere else. Murder and rape. War. Trafficking through the main port cities of Baudhanath and Swayambhunath and, oh joy, Thamel. Gotta remember to warn the others.

Scrolling through the articles, looking at the blurry vids and photos on the 'reader's cracked screen, I think, not for the first time and probably not the last, how screwed up we all are. As a species, I mean. We come all this way...invent things like the J-drive and fauxgrav and all the rest...spend generations spreading ourselves amongst the stars...but are we all that different than we were back on Old Earth? Doesn't seem like it.

Sam used to say that what we needed was a good, old-fashioned bug invasion. Something we could all get behind. Something that would remind us of who we are as a race, and help us forget about the bullshit differences in religion and politics that stowed along with us like rats (or railriders, I suppose) in a cargo hold. To hear Sam tell it, most of our problems since the diaspora are *because* we didn't find a bunch of bug-eyed brain-eaters out here in the black. According to Sam, the only monsters out here are the ones we brought with us, carefully wrapped and lovingly packed along with our socks and family photos.

After a few hours, with darkness falling out in the rainy street, Ammee leans over and whispers to me. "My arm's hurting bad. I want to score some shit tonight. Maybe get flipped nice and hard. You in?"

I shrug. I like drugs and sex as much as the next girl, but Ammee tends to go for the spicier stuff, both in recreational chemicals as well as men. Plus, there's the crusty panty issue still; I haven't had time to find a free clinic.

"Come on," she says, leaving her stack of printbooks on the floor. "Let's go find paradise."

Paradise, it turns out, ends up being an old warehouse nestled amongst a thousand similar buildings. Ammee's new fuckmuppet is a thin guy with taped-up sunglasses and cheeks pitted with rhinopox scars, name of Topper. Topper wears a spacer's vest of many pockets over a kilt of green so grimy it's almost black, and big engineer's boots mended with tape. He gets his name from the tall, black lid perched atop his greasy hair.

We meet him in a park a few blocks from the library. Ammee likes him right away and smiles back at him when he shows interest. He promises us a dry place to stay and says that he's got drugs, kid stuff like poppers and iron monkey, if we want to do a little partying. Ammee's eyes light up when he says this, and I know that we're going with him no matter what I say.

Something about Topper makes me nervous. I don't know what, something about the way his lips twitch when he smiles, or his raw, nail-bitten fingers. Something.

I try to tell Ammee, but she brushes me off with an eye roll. Fucking kids. Wish I still knew everything. Still, a squat's a squat and my cobra is never far from my hand, and I've stayed in worse. Way worse.

While Ammee pays Topper back for the hospitality, I sit in the common room down the hall, nodding to the other 'riders and 'punks that have chosen to shelter here. They sit on sprung couches and mismatched chairs scavenged from trash bins. A fire crackles in an old, cut-down steel mail container.

The other squatters are mainly girls, six or seven of them, with one or two hard-case-type guys mixed in. They all stare at me, sizing me up, as I sit beside the fire. Something about the expressions on the girls' faces makes me more nervous than I already am.

Ammee comes out of the back an hour later, staggering from either the sex or the drugs, maybe both. When she gets closer I can see that she's got suck marks on her neck and what looks like blood rimmed around one nostril and her eyes are red from crying. She cradles her busted arm against her chest and scrupulously avoids looking at me.

Topper follows a minute later. "What's for dinner, you *lund chuse* bastards?"

He smiles when he says it, but the twitch in his smile makes a liar out of his tone. "We got canned asparagus and some scrounged carry-out from Vanish's," one of the other 'punks, one of the guys, says.

He leers at me. "Well serve that shit up, then. I want to eat before I get me a taste of this one."

"Wait," I say, raising my hands. Shit. "I'm not fucking you, if that's what you're after. I appreciate you letting us stay in your place, but I don't do that. Besides, I got a wicked case of the 'girl troubles', so trust me, you don't want it anyway."

"*Gaand chaat mera*," Topper says, still smiling that twitchy smile. "I'll hold my breath if I have to, but you're putting out, you fucking cooze."

I look at Ammee. "Come on, we're leaving."

Topper shakes his head and reaches into his boot. He pulls out a pistol, a big, nasty thing, a .38 from the looks of it, rusty, with taped-up grips. I can see the blunt, dull tips of the slugs resting in their chambers in the revolver's wheel.

"You ain't going nowhere 'less I tell you," Topper says, the smile melting like ice in a blast furnace. Underneath is the nastiest expression I've seen for a long while. My guts go cold, and heavy.

"After I see what you can do, you'll go out and work for me, you savvy?" he asks, totally reasonable-like. "I get everything you make, and in exchange, I protect you. Thamel is a rough place, and stupid 'rider bitches need themselves protection. Am I right?"

The hard-cases nod, smiling. The other girls are all silent. Ammee looks at the ground, still avoiding my eye, nodding and swaying. I wonder what she's tripping on. I keep my hand out of my bag and sit, quiet, while Topper eats.

When he's done he pulls me up by my arm. "Ammee!" I say, reaching for her. "Ammee, come with us!" I look Topper in the eye. "Can she *please* come with us?"

Topper frowns. "You want her to watch?" I nod, then he smiles, already playing the cheap-ass porno in his head, no doubt. Three-way action, he's thinking. How exotic.

I clutch my bag to my chest as he drags us down the hall and into a room with a bare, stained mattress and not much else. A candle burns on a cracked dish in the corner, next to some used needles and an empty blister pack of jag. No wonder Ammee seems so out of it. He tells her to sit in the corner and pushes me down.

I don't struggle but he hits me anyway. The pain brings tears to my eyes. I smear the blood around on my face, trying to make it look worse than it is. After the fifth or sixth punch, I go limp, even though my head's still pretty clear.

I see my bag, lying just beside the mattress.

Topper sets his hat on the floor. He pulls up the kilt and paws at my pants. I slap at his hands, but let him drag them down. I know he'll be most distracted soon.

It burns when he pushes inside of me, from the infection and from the humiliation of it. I close my eyes and see Sam, sweet Sam. See his eyes and his close-cropped hair. See his strong face, so different from Topper's yellowy-gray, pockmarked cheeks. I open my eyes a crack, watching Topper move over me.

I reach out with my foot and hook the strap on my bag.

"Oh, yeah, you like that, huh?" Topper says. "Watch me, bitch," he says to Ammee. "I'll let you clean her up after, if you pay good attention." Then he groans and closes his eyes.

I reach down into my bag. My fingers find the cold metal. The cobra. I pull it out, snapping back my wrist just like Sam showed me, so its steel head curls all the way back.

"What...?" Topper says.

I slash the cobra across his neck, thumb mashed down on the power button. I haven't charged its battery for a while, but there's enough juice in it to make Topper jerk as the ribbed steel coils across his throat. He tries to scream, but all that comes out is a thin whistle.

I push him off of me, still holding down the button as I scramble off the filthy mattress. The cobra is warm, and heavy,

buzzing a little as it discharges. Topper rolls onto all fours, gasping, twitchy fingers searching in his spacer's vest for the gun.

I let go of the button and the cobra uncoils, snapping back. Then I hit him with it, with all the panic-juiced strength I've got, straight in the back of the head, holding down the button again. The metal hood smacks down into his greasy hair, buzzing, stinging. Topper flops on his belly, one arm underneath him. I lay into him with the metal wand, grunting with effort. Blood spatters across the mattress, adding red streaks to the brown stains already there.

"Stop," Ammee mumbles from the corner. "You'll kill him."

I keep hitting him. Every time the cobra makes contact, he jerks and I think maybe he's got the gun this time, so I keep swinging, again and again.

"Stop!" Ammee yells, and this time I do. I look down at what I've done, see Topper's torn ears and bleeding face and head. He's not moving. I can't tell if he's breathing or not.

"Come on," I say to Ammee. "We're leaving."

She comes over and reaches under him. "I'll get the gun."

"No!" I say, pushing her away.

"The fuck?" she spits. The high seems to be wearing off a little, which is good news. "We should have it in case one of them tries to stop us."

"No guns," I tell her. I don't have time to tell her why.

I stand and pull on my pants, listening in case one of the hard cases heard the struggle. Ammee sits in her corner, staring at Topper with wide eyes. When I have my boots on, I pull Ammee to her feet and sling my bag across my chest.

Hand-in-hand, we run for it, staggering and turning at random, looking back to see if anyone's following. After a few miles it feels like we finally slow down. I use the skyglow to find our way back to the strip.

We find Daisy outside a tea shop, panhandling the crowd while Dag busks. He strums the beat-up mandolin he carries around everywhere and sings of love. His voice is thin and cracked, but lovely all the same. I wonder what he must have sounded like before.

Daisy takes in Ammee's bruised face and, wordlessly, rolls up her rug, then says something in Dag's ear. Together, we track down Jewel and Claire, but it's close to dawn before we're all together again.

I'm tired and twitchy, and I can't even remember when I slept last, but we need to decide what to do. We use Dag's busking money to buy breakfast. Nobody says anything to Ammee about her shitty choice of fuckmuppet, but the unspoken accusation hangs heavy between us and her. Nobody says what we're all thinking.

We could have stayed here for a few weeks, built up our cash. Now we have to change cities. Maybe even get offplanet, depending on who Topper knows and how dedicated he'll be about finding us.

If I didn't kill him, that is. I think of him, lying on the terrible mattress, not moving...

Like Sam. Motionless. Lying beside the gun. Blood and bits of brain and bone sprayed across the cheap sheetrock...

...not moving, but I think he was breathing when we left. I think. He was. He's gotta be. A deader will bring a totally different kind of heat down on me. On us.

Either way, we decide that Thamel's gotten too hot for us. We slog back out to the rail yard, and camp out in the bushes outside the perimeter fence. Claire says that the next town down the line is bigger, more industrial. That means less outsiders to panhandle from, but hopefully less scum like Topper, too. Hard to tell.

"Where did you learn to fight like that?" Ammee asks, sitting beside me in the shelter of a scrub tree.

"I don't know nothing," I say. "It's not hard to swing a cobra."

"Bullshit," Ammee replies. "I've seen plenty of fights, and you took him apart like it was the easiest thing in the world."

"You got it wrong," I insist. "I was just lucky."

"Well, I want me some of that luck. We need that, out here. Can you... Can you show me?"

I think about Sam, teaching me to use the cobra, his gift to me on our one-year anniversary. *I don't like you walking home from the tram after class at night*, he told me, as I opened the box. *It would kill me if someone came after you when I wasn't around, and you weren't able to defend yourself.*

Sam spent six years in Port Saint Margaret's Marine Corps, fighting in one border war after another, before he was finally allowed to muster out and go to college. He was hard, Sam was, veteran of hundreds of firefights, but gentle, too. At least, he was always gentle to me.

When he was drunk, sometimes he'd get all weepy, and would tell me about the times he'd had to kill up close, with a knife, or even with his hands. He'd cry then, clinging to me like Ishmael held onto that coffin of Queequeg's in that story he read me. Held me all night, tossed by storms of dreams, shaking and shivering while I stroked his sweaty hair.

He even taught me to shoot, the same gun I found in his hand when I came home from class and found him. I cupped his cold cheek and said goodbye, then fled our shared apartment, convinced that somehow, someone would blame me for what he did to himself.

I shake my head. I've tried hard to not think of him; remembering's too hard. I don't want to be back there, in the kitchen we shared, watching the flies crawl on his unblinking eyes and on the awful black-red stuff clumped on the walls. What the fuck's wrong with me?

Ammee looks at me, waiting for me to give her an answer. Despite what just happened, even after Topper and everything else she's been through, she still has eagerness in her eyes. She wants to learn something new. She smiles at me and I feel myself smiling back. Just a reflex at first, but almost right away the gesture makes me feel better.

"Maybe..." I begin, then take a deep breath. "Maybe I'll teach you some things. But later, OK?" Ammee grins and nods, then drifts off to sleep.

We hop a train in the dark of the night, after waiting hours for just the right line of haulers. The car we choose turns out to be a multimodal, a framework rail car meant to carry cargo modules from space hauler to rails to ground hovers and trucks. It's empty now, with only a crossed X of steel girders for a floor.

We strap our packs to the iron ladders, like usual, and doze fitfully in the groaning, shrieking dark. Ammee sits across from me, on the other side of the open floor. Just below, the

wooden rail ties blur past.

I wake in the blue gray just before dawn. Ammee dangles her foot through the open floor, idly scraping the toe of her sneaker along the gleaming metal ribbon. She must feel me watching her, because she looks up at me, and grins.

The smile, so improbable after all we've been through tonight, wakes something in me. I can feel it, like a flower opening delicate petals, reacting to the first rays of the warming sun. It's a part of me that's been buried, entombed in layers and layers of careful ice since the day I walked into the stench of blood and shit and gunpowder. Into the sight of everything I'd loved sprayed across a cheap sheetrock wall. Despite the aches of the road and the burning between my legs and the still-fresh sensation in my fingertips of the cobra's buzzing discharge, I smile back, perhaps the first unguarded smile I've given in years.

That's always how I'll remember her... Smiling at me. In the wan, watery light, I can't see her scabs or zits. Can't see the dark bags around her eyes or the blood still crusted around her nose. In the dim blue, she's healthy and alive, with skin of flawless porcelain, the dirt and grime of the rails only a little visible. Her teeth glow like pearls between the soft, inviting cushions of her lips.

I see her foot twitch, and I have time to glance down and see the rails split as a side-branch angles away from the main line. I open my mouth to shout a warning – Ammee's not looking at what her feet are doing – but before a sound can come out her boot snags on the transition.

Ammee's leg jerks down and she's pulled along with it. I hear her pack straps snap. Quick as that, as the shout's still forming, she's snatched away. I don't feel so much as a bump as the spinning steel wheels roll over her.

I sit, eyes wide, staring at Ammee's pack, still threaded through the steel ladder. The broken straps flap in the wind. The warmth in my chest from a moment before is gone, like atmo sucked through an open airlock into the eternal cold and silence of the black. I feel a scream caged in my chest, struggling to burst free.

I look over at Jewel and Daisy, side-by-side at the other end of the swaying platform, arms hooked through their packs. Dag and Claire are across from them, wrapped in each other's arms. All are asleep, snatching what comfort they can in their dreams.

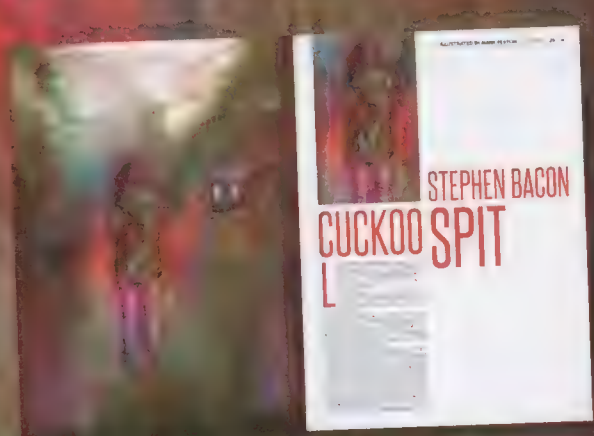
I sit on the cold steel, lips clamped down on the scream still burning in my belly and chest. Stare at the empty hole that used to be a girl named Ammee. I sit, quietly, shaking and shivering, waiting for the scream to finally burst free, feeling the last warm part inside of me go colder...colder...colder...

We roll through the watery dawn on cold, steel rails, together, alone.

Matthew Cook is the author of the dark fantasy novels *Blood Magic* and *Nights of Sin*. He also writes short stories, novellas, and the occasional magazine article. Matt lives and works in the hinterlands of Ohio, a fabled realm known for its mad cows, microbrews, and a certain college sports team named after a poisonous nut of no commercial value. If this author bio looks very familiar that's because it's the one we used in issue #235 (to accompany 'Insha'Allah'), as Matt is currently on honeymoon in Prague.

BLACK STATIC

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ONCE ALL EIGHT OF THE PARTY HAD DISEMBARKED onto the topside of the alien creature, the tender didn't wait to wave them off. Kyra Byrne, hooded against the chill air, made a point to watch it leave.

She committed every detail to memory as the tender picked up speed, its pontoons skimming the surface of the swamp. It lifted with a blast of eco-permitted hydrogen peroxide rockets that boomed over the foaming water, to flee up to orbit and the heavy graded-Z plus shielding of the starship *Long Hope*.

After the last echo of its departure died across the swamp, none of the group broke the silence. Glassy water lapped against the grazer's flanks beneath them; the howdah creaked with their weight as they settled into their seats, each alone for a moment with their thoughts.

Her hollowed cheeks welcomed the sunlight after so many weeks cooped up in her starship cabin. Like the others, she wore sunglasses to protect her from the blazing light and strong UV of Procyra Minor, this planet's F8 yellow-white dwarf sun. A small part of her was thrilled that another world's sunshine dazzled her, despite the reason she was there.

Yet even five degrees north of the equator the sunlight failed to warm the air much above freezing. And if this planet's star suddenly flared, as it often did... Well, death had already claimed her and her companions.

The howdah that the group of humans sat in was a platform of lignin and ABS-fibre composite, with moulded benches, strapped to the body of the *Pascuus aeternus* beneath them. The common name for the alien was grazer, because that's what they did in this part of their lifecycle. They were sentient, possibly as intelligent as humans, but Kyra didn't expect much conversation from the creature. The brochure had been clear about that.

All Kyra could see of this grazer was wrinkled mud-brown skin, like elephant hide, that curved into the water where most of its brontosaurus-like bulk was supported. A long flattened tail trailed off behind it between the stalks of wetgrass.

The grazer set off with a lurch. All eight of the humans clutched the benches until they got used to the peculiar rolling motion of the grazer stumping its way across the swamp. Kyra lacked the skill to deduce its number of legs from its gait – one of human science's mysteries. Now and then they passed scattered clumps of wetgrass, thrown by the garish sunlight into sharp-edged bluish relief against rippling silvery water.

She wondered if the grazer was feeding as it carried them along. The brochure mentioned the grazer's mouth was underneath it (hence no head or neck – only a single eyestalk out front), and wetgrass was its staple food. She felt queasy from the motion, but the pain in her stomach was beginning to come back. She reached for her bottle of morphine, praying that she could hold down the drink long enough for it to work.

Dry land was already in sight. The mudbanks increased in number until the grazer waded through channels between islands, rather than across open water. She told herself it wasn't long now, then her pain would be gone forever.

She tucked what thin tufts of straw-blond hair she had left back under her hood, more to help her feel better prepared for what was to come than because of any worries about her ap-

one-way ticket by nigel brown

pearance. She was eight medical consultations and three failed chemotherapy sessions past that point by now. She was the youngest of the group, by far. But that didn't bother her any more – she'd learned to accept her fate, and the malign inoperable tumour that nestled in her abdomen.

As she took another swig from her bottle, the man sitting opposite caught her eye. "My kids would have loved this part of the trip," he said. "Especially as we don't need airmasks here." The nametag on his overcoat read SIMON MOORE. He scratched at his stubbled cheek with skeletally thin fingers. "My youngest loves exobiology. Wants to visit all the 15 Worlds when she grows up. She'd have done a great project for school on this wetgrass." He grabbed at a tall stalk that brushed them; it snapped off in his hand. "This stuff even survives the flares. Sure, the exposed parts burn up, but the main body of the plant hides underground, beneath the water. Enough grows up afterwards to feed the grazers not killed by the flares."

At first, Kyra stared at Moore blankly, not really listening to his babble. He seemed oblivious to this. He just wanted to talk. He scanned the horizon ahead. "I can see the cliff already, where we're going."

She'd read tabloids back on Earth calling it "Heaven's Gateway". Whatever. A gap in the cliff wall, where a fast river had cut a deep gorge through the sandstone. No one without a fatal illness was allowed on this journey, and no humans had ever returned. Kyra, her companions, and those few that had come before them trusted in the grazers' promise.

But if Kyra's plan worked, she would be the first to report back.

From this distance, she fixed the view of the Gateway in her memory for future reference. Then she glanced back at Moore. A description of him as a typical fellow traveller would add colour to her account. Her editor would want more than her own feelings to flesh out the copy.

"Won't be long now," Moore said in a hoarse voice, more to himself than her.



She understood his anticipation; she shared it herself. And his fear.

Moore shivered, despite his heavy overcoat. With her renewed interest, Kyra wondered briefly what disease was wasting him, but she turned from his friendly gaze.

It was impossible that the man knew of her mission, she was sure of that, and her editor at the World Wide Site would never betray her. Everyone would deny everything – the usual practice – but strings had been pulled to smuggle her the equipment that she needed. No one knew about her concealed titanium alloy transmitter pod, or her colleague back on the *Long Hope* who waited to pick up her final, her best, her most exclusive piece of journalism. This story would probably win her awards, but posthumously, she thought sadly. She would have loved to have stood on a stage and collected a trophy.

Their grazer had almost cleared the swamp by now. The wetgrass had thinned out enough to reveal other grazers, humped out of the water like beached whales. Occasionally the party passed close to one, but it rarely turned its eyestalk to inspect them. It was no use trying to communicate with it: they were not interested in anything beyond the wetgrass. They ignored their guests from the stars.

Only another group of humans going upstream and taking advantage of this planet's gift, Kyra thought, *and it means less than nothing to these creatures.* She tried to imagine what it was like to grow up as a grazer, and failed. Her own parents had died in a freak moon shuttle smash-up over the Mare Crisium hub, long before this planet's secret had been discovered. Even so, it would have been too late for them: Hyperdrive Grade 3 still took seven weeks to get here, and no life-support systems could have kept the wreckage of her parents' bodies alive that long.

Moore stood up, muttered some apologies to nobody in particular, then turned and began to vomit over the side of the trellis. His frame heaved as he emptied his last meal. Kyra shuddered, but the grazer seemed oblivious to the small creature on its back discharging down its side. *Maybe it can't even feel it?* she thought. *Is it his illness doing that, or sea-sickness?* An elderly couple rode alongside in silence: dull-eyed, liver-spotted hands together, fingers entwined. They mirrored her expression – a mixture of horror, disgust, embarrassment.

At this last stage of the journey, their grazer had begun to be accompanied by others. These carried no howdahs but were approaching the Gateway for their own sakes. Kyra spotted that some had scabrous backs with thin hides, bones poking up like small ridges; others lurched as they moved, as though drunk: she was sure they were in pain. They laboured through the shallows, missing the buoyancy of the deeper water, but determined to move upstream.

The sandstone cliff, crumbled at its base, loomed above them. Their grazer entered Heaven's Gateway.

Kyra fought down a renewed pang of fear at what was to come. There had never been a way out ever since she'd boarded the howdah, but passing through the Gateway felt like crossing the final boundary.

Once inside the gorge, the sunlight dropped to a more bearable twilight. She felt hot despite the cold air, loosened her overcoat, and noticed that the others had, too.

Her joints protested against the howdah's movement. Trem-

bling, she reached down for the morphine bottle strapped to her belt. A swig would have to do. By the time the pain subsided and she was ready to notice her surroundings again, they were far enough up the gorge to see a noticeable closing in of the walls that stretched up far above their heads. The river's flow had increased. The grazer, now joined by a long line of others, plodded on. Ahead, the gorge narrowed further until most of its depths lay in shadow.

Their grazer lurched towards one side of the gorge. The sheer face of the sandstone cliff was broken by a wide shelf running alongside the river. The grazer lifted its eyestalk up, extending it until the thin hide was stretched tight, measuring the distance with its eye. It stood still for a moment, the river swirling past its legs, then sidled up alongside the shelf.

Kyra was aghast. The path looked steep. Too steep for her aching limbs.

But the others stood up as soon as the grazer halted. Moore climbed out of the howdah first, eager to reach solid ground. Although he'd pushed past the others, he turned to help the elderly couple step across the trellis onto the dusty surface. Kyra hung back until everyone had left. She took another swig from her bottle as she contemplated the steep path.

But she couldn't stay sitting in the howdah, much as she wanted to. The morphine would help. She sighed, and stood up. She added her biodegradable sunglasses to the little pile on the howdah bench – they didn't need them here in the shadows.

The grazer's eyestalk dipped down – it had been patiently waiting for the howdah to empty. It moved off into the middle of the river, then lowered itself down into the water. The howdah suddenly bobbed up and floated downstream alone, back to the swamp.

"Come on," she heard a croaky voice say, raised against the noise of the rushing water. "Not long now!"

It was the elderly man. He smiled at her, along with his companion.

Kyra took heart from his kindness, and felt slightly ashamed. If they could go on, so could she.

"I'm all right," she said. "We'd better get going." She glanced at the sheer cliff walls that soared above them, at the bright streak of sky overhead. "There's nothing for us here."

Their particular grazer had already started the march upstream again – now one of many in the line of huge creatures: she wasn't certain she could even recognise it.

The party of shuffling humans went two-by-two along the shelf. Soon it narrowed to a ledge that rose up above the faster flowing waters of the river upstream. There was a time when they could have made the distance in easy strides. Now they made slow but steady progress, wincing with the pain in their joints. Kyra trudged onward with her head bowed, her morphine bottle knocking against her side. She spotted a man ahead who wore a degradable exoskeleton of chitin clamped to his waist. It whirred and clicked as his thin legs were marched along like matchsticks. *Motor neurone disease,* she thought. *I could have done with those leg-frames.*

They reached the end of the ledge. It finished at a sheer cliff wall, broken only by a cave entrance. She followed the others inside. They had to stoop to avoid cracking their heads on the cave roof – the tunnels had been originally cut by water into the

sandstone. She suspected that the contractors the grazers had brought in to widen them, to make them passable for humans, had done a cheap job. The floor was uneven, the walls were roughly finished and barely lit by a line of crude glowtubes that disappeared off into the twilight.

Once her eyes had adjusted to the dim light, she saw the notice – in crude English letters marred by paint drips – set in the wall ahead under an arrow. THIS WAY FOR HUMANS.

Now they were far enough inside the passageway to smell a muggy warmth, and something else. A sweet aroma that grew more pungent with every step.

They emerged from the tunnel into a cavern, seemingly filled with water, that stretched off into darkness.

"How do we cross this?" Kyra asked, but Moore pointed across the rippling surface, toward another break in the cavern wall where the lake waters flowed out into the gorge. Great bodies moved in the gloom. The grazers. They splashed their way forward into the lake's depths. Their eyestalks lingered for a moment above the water, as if they were taking one last lingering look at the world, then they were gone.

Kyra stood at the edge of the underground lake, unable to move. So this was their destination. The grazers couldn't survive the solar flares without a sessile form. And the grazers' sessile lifecycle allowed the humans a chance for immortality, for the price of a starfare. But the brochure had been vague about certain details.

The 15 Worlds considered this a generous gesture to the human race.

And here she was.

Her fellow humans, foremost in the group, didn't wait. They strode forward until their feet were in the water. On contact they shuddered – Kyra wondered if it was freezing, this far underground – but they continued to wade deeper into the lake.

"The pain's gone!" Moore said, knee deep. He froze in his tracks, then lowered himself into the water until he dropped out of sight, relaxed and smiling.

"I'd forgotten what it was like..." said another voice, choking off with emotion.

The elderly couple were just ahead of Kyra. She watched as the couple linked arms and, together, stepped into the water. At first they stumbled, but they kept moving. When the dark waters lapped around their thighs their backs straightened.

"How does it feel?" Kyra called.

The old man turned to her. "Wonderful!" he exclaimed. "It takes away all the tiredness...all the pain."

His companion tugged at his hand. "Come, Henry," she murmured. "Come."

Kyra, alone now on the shore, watched as the couple waded out further, getting deeper with each step. Soon they were waist-deep, then their shoulders went under. They took deep breaths – their last – as their heads submerged beneath the dark liquid.

She shivered. This was it. She stood alone. The last human on the edge of the lake. All she needed to do was make her report. When she was ready, she'd toss the transmitter pod into the river. It would float downstream out of the cave system until the signal could be punched up to the *Long Hope*.

Then, at least, she would have some sort of immortality

among the 15 Worlds. In here, it didn't seem much, but it was something.

She pulled an illicit flashlight from a pocket in her shoulder strap, and shone the beam into the lake.

The halogen light pierced the water's gloom to reveal the submerged sessile grazer. Long filaments, segmented, lay just beneath the surface, with larger nodes of living tissue further out from the shore. *Like a huge, floating brain*, she thought. *Ready to invite us to join it*. She could make out the bodies of her former companions, each one now wrapped in grey tendrils like mummies. Beyond them were partly digested lumps of earlier pilgrims, no longer human-shaped.

Her stomach churned at the sight, but it was those filaments of tissue that had touched the others, took away their pain, worked the miracle by absorbing them. The waters were suffused with a gossamer web. Touching that – according to the brochure issued by the grazers – took away all pain, forever. The larger filaments would paralyse the body, absorb it, but keep their minds alive.

She swung the beam through the water. The tendrils glistened in its glare: they trembled as the light passed.

It sounds fine when you read the brochure, she thought. *No wonder the grazers didn't want us to know the details. But who wants to know the gory details of a life-saving surgical operation?*

After a while, her gaze – almost in a hypnotic state – was broken by a renewed spasm of pain in her abdomen.

Spurred into motion, she felt in her pack for the transmitter pod. The metal casing was cold in her hand, but its weight was somehow reassuring, when everything else around her – even her chemically-degradable clothes – was designed to melt away within weeks.

She gathered her thoughts, ready to record her impressions of the journey and the cavern. It would be a sensational read across the 15 Worlds.

Yet she hesitated. What if this put people off, so they rejected the grazers' offer? They would die but, unlike her, it would be forever. Did she have the right to do this?

She sighed. She was a journalist. This was her duty, her swansong, her memorial to the millions of the 15 Worlds. Licking her dry lips, she began to recite her impressions of arrival, of the howdah, the journey to this place.

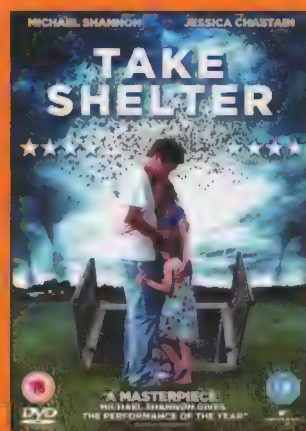
The relief of her fellow travellers.

But by the time she finished, she knew what she had to do.

She weighed the pod in her hand for a moment, before flicking it to ERASE mode. It trilled against her clammy fingers – the data she'd stored was all gone. Then she flung it as far out into the stream as she could.

She switched off the light, so she couldn't see what lay in the lake, then waded into the dark water.

Nigel Brown has published stories in various magazines and anthologies, the latest anthology being *Rocket Science* (Mutation Press, 2012). This is his fourth appearance in *Interzone*. His third *Interzone* story ('Annuity Clinic', issue #188) was selected for *The Year's Best SF 9* (edited by Hartwell & Cramer). As well as science fiction, Nigel has had fantasy, ghost and historical fiction published in the UK, USA and Japan. He lived in Brighton until recently but has now moved to the borders of north London and Hertfordshire.



LASER FODDER TONY LEE

THE SHRINE

•
WE NEED TO TALK
ABOUT KEVIN

•
STRAW DOGS

•
TAKE SHELTER

•
THE REVENANT

•
ID:A

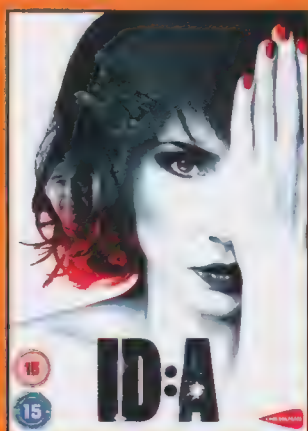
•
MARDOCK SCRAMBLE:
THE FIRST COMPRESSION



Investigative journalist Carmen (Cindy Sampson, *High Plains Invaders*, and *Swamp Devil*), photographer Marcus (typecast Aaron Ashmore, *Fear Island*, Jimmy Olsen in *Smallville*, twin brother of Shawn – Iceman in *X-Men* trilogy), and cub reporter Sara (Meghan Heffern, *Insecticidal*), travel to inhospitable Poland on the trail of a missing backpacker. In an isolated village, they discover the evildoings of a satanic cult. I got a bad feeling about this... Horror continues its onslaught against the tourist industry in **THE SHRINE** (BD/DVD, 27 February), a rural shocker with unfriendly, uncannily photogenic locals, filmed in Canada. A weird unearthly fog conceals a demonic statue that bleeds. It's a cursed land of mummified corpses in nailed-on burial masks. There is a daylight chase through woods before the hapless trio of trespassers are kidnapped for human scary farce – sorry, I mean sacrifice, of course. Things are gonna get ugly...

While Marcus digs a grave, killings begin accompanied by unsubtitled ranting – in Polish, presumably (although what language the cheesily demonic stereotypes are speaking I have no idea). From the creepy little girl, to villagers with hidden monster ghoulish faces that are revealed by victims' fears, and some poltergeist activity wreaking noisy fury without significant genre success, *The Shrine* is a pedantically slow gothic. It's essentially derivative, and it mistakes rambling storytelling and sundry off-screen mayhem for atmosphere and middling suspense. And there's a whole lotta possession going on. It's horrible enough but lacks a genuine sense of mortal dread. It's business as usual, then, for another low-budget genre production that's a wholly unimaginative failure. Could it be viewed and judged as a satire on the paranoid mania of right wing religious fiends?

Co-writer and director Jon Knautz previously made the comedy-actioner *Jack Brooks: Monster Slayer* (2007), so it's advisable to look for jokey intent here, but *The Shrine* lacks any actors who are capable of even unappealingly broad humour. You're welcome to visit the shrine for its brief moments of the uncanny, but you should leave quickly before those hooded priestly nutters hammer metal spikes into your eyes.



Another BBC Films and UK Film Council jobbie, **WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN** (BD/DVD, 27 February) concerns a killing spree at a New York high school and its aftermath. Based on a novel by Lionel Shriver, and directed by Lynne Ramsay (best known for *Morvern Callar*, 2002), the story is told in muddled flashbacks with a biopic styled inclusively which avoids sensationalising its controversial and socially relevant aspects. The plotline shows how the killer's mother Eva (Tilda Swinton), a formerly successful travel writer now reduced to boring office work, struggles to deal with her unresponsive (to potty training), and mischievously disinterested (learning difficulties?) first child: "Floppy little boy," notes a doctor, but he can't find anything wrong with young Kevin.

Later, after teenage culprit Kevin (Ezra Miller, *Afterschool*) has taken a liking to archery and done his worst, the widowed Eva is harassed by neighbours who blame her for her son's homicidal mania, and her life is stalled by feelings of guilt (as per the

cliché of thrown mud sticking to a wall). Of course, Ramsay's drama frames the same old question of whether it's nature or nurture that makes people what they are.

"I am the context," says eavesdropper Kevin, commenting upon a conversation between his parents. It doesn't help much that Kevin's dad Franklin (character-actor John C. Reilly, *Step Brothers*) is such a dolt, and seemingly oblivious to Kevin's path of self-destruction. Obnoxiously cynical and sociopathic Kevin (who just looks pretty much as you'd expect in a movie like this), frequently prompts his mum's suspicions but it's almost a textbook dysfunctional family scenario, predetermined to end in horrific tragedy. There's a grim fatalism here, especially in such episodes as when an increasingly sadistic Kevin is blamed for blinding his quietly normal little sister with drain cleaner. However, there are too many scenes of the parents just sitting around looking blank, as if expecting oracle answers to fall into their miserablist heads from the sympathetic nature of an overcast sky.

Like her co-stars Cate Blanchett and Julia Ormond in David Fincher's genre oddity *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, Tilda Swinton is a striking beauty with a tremendously impressive acting range. And yet Swinton's talent has a tendency for expressions of strangeness which, arguably, means she's better suited to otherworldly roles. Whereas Blanchett plays a scene-stealing Katharine Hepburn in Scorsese's *The Aviator*, and Ormond could portray Vivien Leigh in *My Week With Marilyn*, Swinton seems more at home and in her element as Narnia's White Witch or as archangel Gabriel in comicbook adaptation *Constantine*, and let's not forget her multiple role-playing in *Teknolust*, and the androgynous immortal in *Orlando*. In much lesser, down-to-earth pictures – like Tim Roth's directing debut *The War Zone*, or the Coens' disappointing comedy-drama *Burn After Reading* – Swinton appears to be treading water, filling up a gap in her schedule, or simply waiting for another outré character to come her way. That's not to say that Swinton's outstanding ability is completely wasted in *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, but she's not really being seen at her best either.

This movie has plenty of emotional intensity but it lacks much understanding of child psychology, and meekly shies away from depicting the school gym massacre as a full-blooded horror. The non-diegetic soundtrack is sometimes bizarrely at odds with the prevalent mood, with ironic music that deposits a layer of dark comedy onto gloomy proceedings, and yet it's a gimmick that rarely works in favour of the movie at all. "You don't look happy," says despairing Eva to her son, while she visits delinquent Kevin in prison. "Have I ever?" he replies dourly.



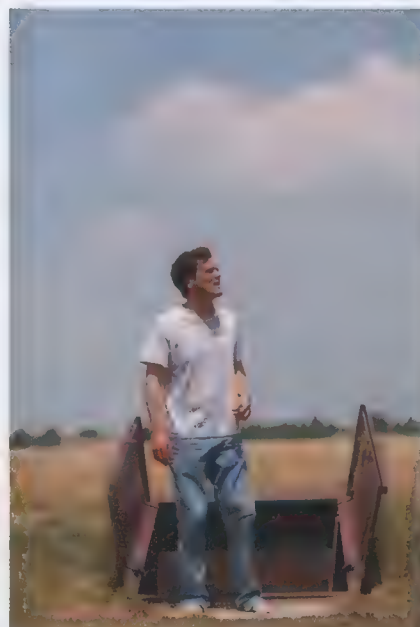
Rod Lurie's **STRAW DOGS** (BD/DVD, 12 March) is a sanitised US remake of Sam Peckinpah's original – which I reviewed for *Black Static* #25. Swapping the rumpled Cornwall for a Mississippi redneck town, it's a futile exercise in southern discomfort. Luckless screenwriter David Sumner (James Marsden, Cyclops in *X-Men*) drives an E-type Jaguar (a British status symbol predestined for destruction here), but he can't change a flat tyre. His wife Amy (Kate Bosworth, *Superman Returns*, and *Warrior's Way*) tends to overplay her ridiculous stereotype as a childish tease. Their stay in her family's house attempts sophisticated intellectual social mores in a rustic homestead, with her parents' old Zydeco records making a stark contrast to David's preference for Beethoven. Local hicks are mostly ruled by grandstanding Neanderthal hillbilly Tom Heddon (James Woods, in the sort of thuggish role that he can sleepwalk through), a former football coach and now a drunken bully.

As in Peckinpah's somewhat dated classic, this version explores the blurry line between charming eccentricities and belligerent stupidity. Modern technology seems purposely ineffective (no mobile phone service for David at home), or anachronistic: David's screenplay about Stalingrad in WW2 is being written on a laptop, while Amy mischievously changes David's blackboard notes. Americanisation adds plenty to the scenario's backdrop, including cultural references (Budweiser as product placement, community obsessions with football, church, and poaching), but nothing fresh to the vengeful plotline

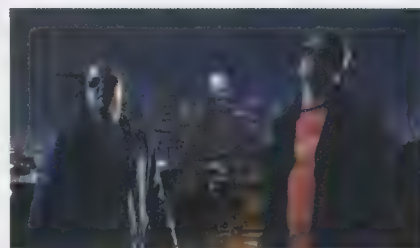
development of this belated entry in the subgenre of a-man's-home-is-his-castle movies.

Too much of the original movie's rather cheesily comedic mentality is retained here, so we see David's bedroom skipping for keeping fit, a similar feigned civility and broken morality in the layabout labourers fixing a barn roof, and the unwillingness of David and Amy to recognise a failed marriage. Lurie's remake also preserves the dead cat hanging in a wardrobe revelation, and that business with a bear-trap set-up for use in the final siege. Mention of "redneck wisdom" guarantees at least one laugh, but it's also the cause of the ugly misanthropy as Heddon beats up retarded Jeremy (Dominic Purcell, killer-croc movie *Primeval*, TV series *Prison Break*). Just like in the original, this has the inter-cutting of a rape scene with David in the woods 'becoming a man' as a novice deer hunter. And so, except for all the expected changes in minor details, due to a different location and update of the zeitgeist for a new generation of viewers, it is difficult to find anything special or specific about this remake to recommend it to fans of the first version with Dustin Hoffman and Susan George.

Four decades of hardcore brutality in horror flicks has simply left this drama's critical narrative incapable of making a solid impact of much social relevance. Yes, it's hard to charge the director with any unwise choices, but in the end this is just another bastardised remake with little to say that's new. Thankfully, at least, the Blu-ray transfer's a very fine job, and this release is a region-free edition.



Jeff Nichols' second feature, **TAKE SHELTER** (DVD/BD, 19 March), is basically a psycho-chiller about one man's fall into madness. Working class dad Curtis (Michael Shannon, *The Runaways* biopic, and star of director Nichols debut *Shotgun Stories*) lives in a small town in Ohio with his wife Samantha (Jessica Chastain, *The Tree of Life*) and daughter Hannah



Undead or immortal, zombie or vampire, can there be any definitive movie version of such genre folklore? D. Kerry Prior's sardonic comedy **THE REVENANT** (DVD/BD, 2 April) starts with a US army patrol through Iraqi oil fields. Unfortunate soldier Bart (David Anders, *Alias*, *Heroes*, *Children of the Corn* remake) is apparently killed in action, but after his funeral back at home in LA, he crawls out of his grave and is not looking his best, even in uniform. "It's just a dream," he mutters to himself. Bart pukes blood and frightens a casualty doctor. His old buddy Joey (Chris Wylde) provides unsightly returnee Bart with a temporary refuge. With a wiccan on one side, and a scientologist on the other, pitiful Bart and baffled Joey have no shortage of homicidal advice about whether zombies or

– who needs an expensive operation to fix her deafness. Curtis begins suffering apocalyptic nightmares of escalating weirdness: yellowy rain, freaky storms, a dog attack, poltergeist activity or an alien visitation, and what could be viewed as zombies. He wakes up one morning having wet the bed, but he's still too ashamed to tell Sam about his dreams. Their family doctor prescribes mild sedatives, and refers Curtis to a psychiatrist in the city, but knowing that his wife would suspect his absence, Curtis agrees to see a local counsellor instead.

Following a panic attack at work, Curtis frets about the paranoid schizophrenia which afflicted his mother, decades ago. He fears that his delusions or hallucinations – which are all psychological horrors, so far – are proof that he's inherited his mother's illness.

Sam thinks Curtis has gone crazy when he starts digging up their backyard to extend an old tornado shelter into a survival bunker. She doesn't know about the bad dreams until Curtis has a seizure in his sleep. Once she's heard about his nightmares and understood his fears about mental health, Sam is level-headed and remains loyal, although she struggles to cope with his bizarre behaviour, and

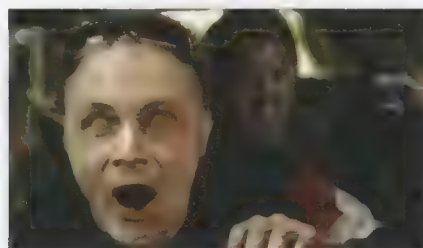
worries about how this may affect young Hannah.

The eerie story reaches its big emotional climax when Curtis is confronted by a former workmate with a score to settle, and the argument unleashes a public outburst by Curtis, ranting a dire warning to the Lions Club community of local families. As if to prove him right later, rather than sooner, there are sirens wailing and Curtis leads his wife and kid into the relative safety of their new shelter. The family sleep through a tornado, but “what if it's not over?” worries Curtis. It's the first of many what ifs that punctuate this drama. Like a scaled-down indie version of Alex Proyas' *Knowing* (2009), *Take Shelter* lacks grandly spectacular visions of inexplicable disaster, but it more than makes up for that with its mix of real world anxieties (unemployment and recession descend upon Curtis and family), and the sheer oddness of a gloomy fable about the potential terrors of any sudden climate change. However, *Take Shelter* is nothing like Roland Emmerich's blockbuster *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004). On the genre spectrum, it's much closer to Larry Fessenden's excellent *The Last Winter* (*Interzone* #212), especially as – unsurprisingly – it finishes with an IOU for its end of days scenario.



European mystery thriller **ID:A** (DVD, 2 April) is by Danish filmmaker Christian E. Christiansen (director of slick but shallow and derivative psycho-thriller *The Roommate* – see *Interzone* #236). Amnesiac girl ‘Aliena’ (Tuva Novotny, *Stratosphere Girl*, *The Invisible*) wakes up by a riverside in rural France. She walks into town with a duffel bag of cash, a handgun, and a sketch signed by artist Ida. In a B&B she finds that she has a nasty scar from a stab wound, and learns about a local politician's murder. Was she involved in the killing? Is this movie a distaff *Bourne*? Changing her appearance, she goes to Denmark, where she's recognised as the wife of celebrity opera singer Just Ore. Now officially identified as Ida, our heroine is wily enough to play glamorous Ida as a role without even knowing about her own life. She spots a man following her and evades pursuit. Perhaps she has read too many spy novels. In a bemusingly clichéd twist, she hires a private detective, paying him in cash to investigate her suspicious husband's old ties to a communist group.

Halfway through the story, a fight scene begins, Ida's memory returns, and the movie goes into lengthy flashback mode to reveal what happened before Ida woke up in France. Surveillance vans lead to the inevitability of a car chase. There are vicious baddies. Ida's gay brother Martin (Carsten Bjørnlund, *The Thing* prequel) is wanted for a major robbery. Ida's marriage is far less than ideal, to say the very least. With its conspiracy driven plot, quasi-espionage action, subculture characters and a curiously likeable yet morally ambiguous heroine, comparisons could be made to *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* and the late Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy, but this is clearly lesser fare. There's a home invasion/shootout finale to crank up the violence quotient and rather too much skating over the abundant plot-holes to maintain many intrigues between a blatantly manipulative three-act structure, but *ID:A* is still a classy looking timewaster.



vampires should be staked or decapitated (just take your pick of cruel-to-be-kind options) in this amusing stoner farce.

Things change once Bart feeds on a mugger. “Why are you doing this to me?” asks his girlfriend Janet (Louise Griffiths), who is distraught, but somehow does not mind the stench of decomposing Bart's re-animation. Bart embarks on a killing spree (and quotes from *Dirty Harry*) as a nocturnal vigilante, cleaning up the city, preying on lowlifes, more so when Joey is wounded and Bart gives him the “dark gift”. As our indestructible anti-heroes rampage through sleazy districts and gangland territories, collecting sensational headlines, *The Revenant* drifts into edgy tragedy, then back to bloody slapstick again. It's a comicbook styled *Death Wish* meets *Near*



Dark with the kind of witty sci-fi twist ending we really haven't seen much of since Dan O'Bannon's *Return of The Living Dead* (1985).

Bart does not mope about for too long, there is no wallowing in post-traumatic stress analogies, or political allegories (like Joe Dante's episode *Homecoming* for the *Masters of Horror* TV series), and thankfully no sign of sparkly vamping in the necro romance between Bart and Janet. It's noticeably a very low-budget effort, but director Prior keeps it ticking along from one ghastly joke onto the next so there's never a dull moment. If you are in the mood for a tongue-in-cheek horror that lives up to its gore punk noir poster artwork, give this engagingly funny flick a try. What's the worst that can happen?



Japanese animation made in 2010, **MARDOCK SCRAMBLE: THE FIRST COMPRESSION** (DVD, 16 April) is adapted from a trilogy of novels and shonen manga comics written by Tow Ubukata. It's set in a futuristic noir-ish megalopolis where a limo drives along a sky-road of green glass. Balot is a 15-year-old hooker, murdered by serial killer Shell – a blond villain who takes 'heroic pills' for courage. As per the 'resurrection protocol' of 'mardock scramble', Balot wakes up from surgery in a hi-tech medical bay auto-doc tank, saved from Shell's burning car by the seemingly altruistic Dr Easter.

Balot has a new skin and there's a nanotech shape-shifting AI as talking golden mouse Oeufcoccue. The plan is to use Balot's testimony in litigation against Shell and the powerful October Corp. Abused 'orphan' Balot has a telepathic link to Oeufcoccue and is protected by its self-defence system. She's being watched and gets attacked but fights with typical neo-cyber anime heroine skills. Cars are CGI and almost photo-real but character imagery is standard anime variety. It's the story of a lonely girl, and her AI mouse, on a philosophical quest for self-understanding and self-determination,

so tragic plot themes resonate with genre tropes even though it's all presented as trendy action fun showcasing an endearing teenager and a cute Disneyesque rodent.

Court hearings are an ordeal for rape victim Balot as she's forced to relive and account for her traumatic past. Lurking in the dark milieu, there are some sicko types who collect human fingers and eyes or body parts including sexual organs, sometimes to decorate their own anatomy. Incestuous kiddie-porn cinema is perhaps the least of their grossly dystopian vices: "Give me the nothingness that's left after her life fades away."

Directed by Susumu Kudo, this is an excellent sci-fi horror, and an unsettling/disturbing thriller like Larsson's *Girl* trilogy meets *RoboCop*. Just sign Takashi Miike or Paul Verhoeven to direct the satirical obscenities of a live-action version, and it's a cult award winner. The cliff-hanger ending during a showdown finale is followed by a cover of *Amazing Grace* playing over the credits and it actually works! The follow-up, *Mardock Scramble: The Second Combustion* (2011), will probably be on DVD soon, I hope. This disc includes the original release (63 minutes), and the director's cut (67 minutes), in English dubbed and original Japanese language (with English subtitles) versions.

ALSO RECEIVED

Mad Detective (BD, 13 February).
Eureka's Masters of Cinema Blu-ray release.
DVD release reviewed by Tony Lee in
Interzone #220.

Immortals (3D BD/Triple Play, 5 March).
Theatrical release reviewed by Nick Lowe
in *Interzone* #238.

Whitechapel Series 3 (DVD, 12 March).

The Thing (BD/DVD, 26 March).
Theatrical release reviewed by Nick Lowe
in *Interzone* #238.

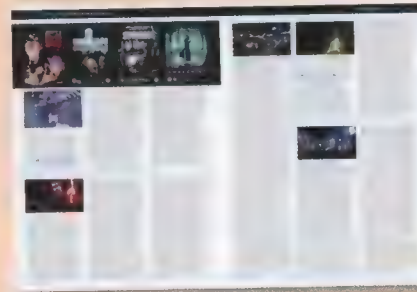
Kill Keith (DVD, 26 March).

Cassadaga (DVD/BD, 16 April).

Dream House (DVD, 16 April).

A mention here does not preclude a review
in a future issue of *Interzone*, or in Tony's
Black Static column Blood Spectrum.

If you'd like to read about a lot more new DVD/Blu-ray releases then please consider subscribing to the award-winning *Black Static* for Tony Lee's Blood Spectrum column. You'll also find up to 16 pages of book reviews, plus interviews, comment, colour art and new stories.





There were three of them then, and they were each eight years old: three young boys more at home with games and fantasy than hard reality. The day that fused these two states – when a nightmare became real life – changed them forever. But all that happened much earlier, in the Autumn of 1980. This is what came later, long after the fact. Rather than the details of the incident itself, this story constitutes the *results* of the harm. Cover art by **Ben Baldwin**

'*The Harm* is a distillation of the essence of true horror. As uncompromisingly confrontational and as arbitrarily vicious as real life can sometimes be, *The Harm* casts a bright light onto the deepest recesses of the human soul and encounters nothing but endless darkness' **Mark Morris**

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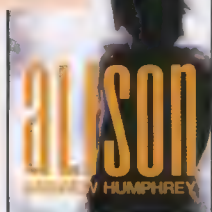


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'Stunningly good' **Chris Teague** • 'Absolutely fantastic' **Mat Coward** • 'Utterly brilliant' **Neil Williamson** • 'My book of the year so far. Breathtaking' **Mark West** • 'A heady dose of violence and off the wall sex' **Peter Tennant** • 'It really is an all-nighter' **Rick Kleffel** • 'Bleak, intense, moving, heartbreaking stuff' **Gary McMahon**

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JOURNEY 2:
THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND

A MONSTER IN PARIS

STAR WARS EPISODE I:
THE PHANTOM MENACE 3D

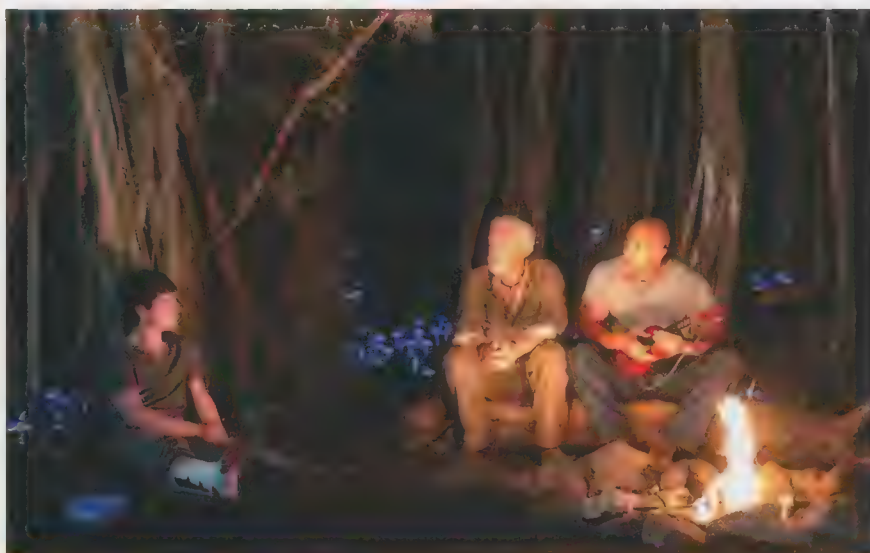
UNDERWORLD: AWAKENING

THE WOMAN IN BLACK

GHOST RIDER:
SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE

THE DARKEST HOUR

CHRONICLE



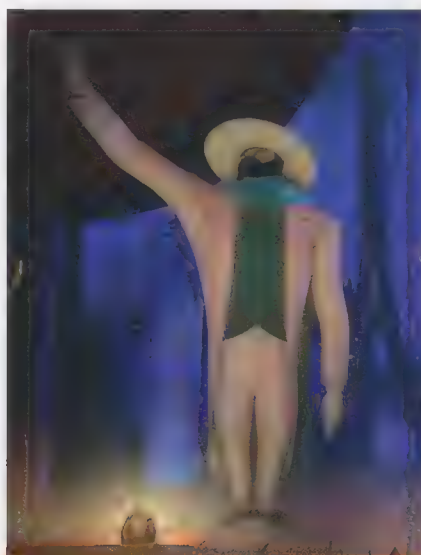
Journey 2: The Mysterious Island

Now that it's possible to add a whole new dimension to the elementary structures of movie kinship, Hollywood's brutal one-parent policy is still more strictly enforced in 3D. In the brave new stereoscopic world *all* families are broken, and all fathers surrogate. In this issue's crop alone, biological fathers are abusive (*Chronicle*), missing (*Underworld: Awakening*), dead (*Journey 2: The Mysterious Island*), God (*The Phantom Menace*), Satan (*Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance*), or a test tube (*A Monster in Paris*), while mothers are dead (*The Woman in Black*) or horribly dying (*Chronicle*), thousands of miles away (*The Darkest Hour*, *Journey 2*), or a slave on Tatooine (*Phantom Menace*), unless they're lucky enough to be a hot action heroine (*Ghost Rider*, *Underworld*), in which case simply see above for the issues with your dad.

JOURNEY 2: THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND is a sequel to 2008's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, the pioneering voyage *extraordinaire* into a subterranean world of clumsy greenscreen and very mid-budget digital environments that nevertheless marked the unlikely start of the modern 3D era. *Journey 1* opened with Josh Hutcherson's father being chased to his death by a T Rex in a fiery gorge in the netherworld, since when his family situation has only declined. As if it wasn't bad enough being offloaded on geophysicist uncle Brendan Fraser and abducted down a volcanic tube in Iceland to discover his dad's remains at the bottom, in this instalment his mom has recast herself, decamped to Dayton, and married Dwayne Johnson, who has muscled in as

stepdad not just to the understandably wary Josh but to the entire franchise, installing himself as coproducer and casting himself above Hutcherson in the credits. Fraser is unceremoniously dismissed from conversation, as his replacement sets about ingratiating himself with his new stepson by helping him with his cryptography project, flying him out to Palau and a rendezvous with Vanessa Hudgens wardrobe for the tropics (and who introduces herself by the time-honoured gesture of pulling the cap off her tumbling locks in slow motion), before winning him over with bizarre berry-bouncing pec stunts and a ukelele serenade of *Wonderful World*, reprised in Hawaiian/Latin big band stylee for the credits. And into this strange mix is inserted an elder generation of AWOL dads with Michael Caine as the dynasty's Crusoe granddad, off adventuring when he should have been there for Hutcherson's late dad, and the inevitable revelation that the Rock himself was abandoned by his own dad at the age of eight.

All this is signifier of a fairly brutal custody struggle with the father of sf itself, played out in the series conceit of a worldwide network of "Verneans" whose creed is reintroduced in the opening voiceover: "In the nineteenth century, Jules Verne wrote some of the most famous adventure stories ever told. Most consider these works of science fiction. Verneans know otherwise." This being a Walden franchise, there's some rather forced reading-is-fun bibliomancy with popular editions of bad Verne translations. But as our heroes remark of the Nautilus' famed electrical engine, "This battery's 140



A Monster in Paris

years old. It's gonna need a jump start." So the franchise's real product is a theme-park model of the Verne canon in which achingly contemporary characters ride freely among the depopulated sets of the novels, here with cross-franchise added value from *Treasure Island* and *Gulliver's Travels*. (Somewhere presumably there is a secret society of "Swiftians" who meet in secret to dine on Irish babies.) At the end Luis Guzman is rewarded for his horribly thankless performance of literally guano-eating grins by being allowed to open the Nautilus as a paying tourist attraction. Shot in proper 3D by the legendary David Tattersall, the cinematographer of the *Star Wars* sequels, it looks every bit as fantastic as the first film didn't; and where the first film's ending promised us Atlantis, this one promises the moon. But with *The Hunger Games* about to price Hutcherson out of the market for a sequel, we shouldn't be disappointed if it never achieves liftoff. As the film is only too ready to affirm, dads break their promises to their offspring. It's what they do.

The Vernean era is itself revisited in Bibi Bergeron's 3D animation **A MONSTER IN PARIS**, a spirited if chaotic attempt by a returning Hollywood exile to repatriate the French roots of fantasy film in the belle époque Paris of Méliès and Leroux, with a plot mixed from the juices of *Phantom of the Opera* and *Notre Dame de Paris* with a dash of producer Luc Besson's own *Adèle Blanc-Sec*. After some indecisive protagonising in early scenes centred on a Méliès-fanboy projectionist, the film turns out to be about an accidentally



Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace 3D

monsterised flea who dons mask, cape, and gloves to duet on stage with Vanessa Paradis' angelic club singer and thrill audiences with the invention of gypsy jazz, country pop, and Eurodance, while a vainglorious and philistine police chief seeks his extermination. Bergeron's American decades culminated at DreamWorks with shared directorial credits on *The Road to Eldorado* and *Shark Tale*, but unplugged from the studio machine his story sense is all over the place. The plot zigzags disorientingly from each set piece to the next over bonerattling cobblestones of bumpy motivation, and takes three full scenes in the credits and after before it finally stumbles to a halt. But the sheer indifference to Hollywood narrative protocols means the plot lurches unexpectedly forward at several points where you're expecting a dully cautious application of foot to brake, and the 3D city rises attractively out of the moneysaving mist that drifts off the Seine to spare the backdrop artists' labour.

As for **STAR WARS EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE 3D** itself, this turns out a thoroughly unexciting stereo remix of George Lucas' least loved monument, but a welcome chance to appraise a deeply strange and often very beautiful franchise folly back on the big screen where its unfashionable space-operatic vistas have always belonged, even if the beating suns of Tatooine are dimmed this time around by our polarising clip-ons. Many viewers will never make their peace with Jake Lloyd, Jar-Jar, the midi-chloreans, and dialogue that sounds

to have been typed but not said a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. But the unique strength of *Phantom Menace*, never matched by its sequels, was always its pregnancy with a melancholic epic future in which all these ingenuous, beautiful youngsters would end up brutalised, disillusioned, and dead. The strongest performance in the film, and probably in all the films, is Pernilla August as the Force's tragic babymama who gives away the one thing in her life, in what more than ever stands as a stark, daring, and unique depiction of the experience of slavery in a four-quadrant family blockbuster. And that's before we even begin to contemplate the series arc of baby Jesus gone bad, which lends even Lloyd's performance, one of the few things in the film that doesn't improve at all with repeat viewings, a weight of darkness that only feels the heavier for its utter incongruity with the performer's actual range. Naboo city is still exquisitely visualised and dressed, and Natalie Portman – never as good in the sequels – completely unbalances the film, as you try obsessively and impossibly to unpick the layers of her astounding performance as a soon-to-be-great actress playing an already-terrible one playing her very badly quite convincingly. For inexperienced viewers, it can seem merely maddening that there's no coherent explanation possible for the switches between Portman, Keira Knightley, and Portman attempting to sound like Knightley. But veterans know that the madness is addictive, and that Lucas is remaking *That Obscure Object of Desire* with actresses from the future. And now in 3D.

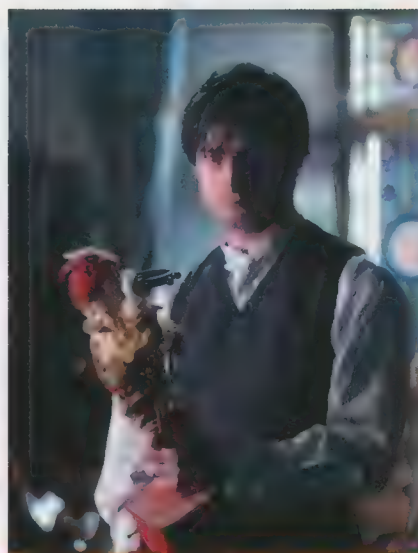


Underworld: Awakening

If the world's greatest 3D actress is still Milla Jovovich by a wire, **UNDERWORLD: AWAKENING** at least mounts an energetic challenge by busting Kate Beckinsale and her franchise out of cryo for a twelve-years-on sequel to the second film in the vampires-v-werewolves franchise, where she finds that Scott Speedman's character has gone missing in the human genocide against vampires and Lycans alike, leaving our Kate with a surprise goth-tween daughter with self-harm healing powers and a conspiracy to unravel that goes all the way to the top, as conspiracies so often will. The script itself has the feeling of having been prematurely defrosted from the development fridge and fought over by rival tribes of toothy mutants; J. Michael Straczynski did time on the middle drafts, but it would be hard to say it shows in the final product, which offers some genuinely topnotch 3D action filmmaking, but none of the resonance of deep mythos that made the Beckinsale-free third film, especially, a guiltless pleasure. Instead we have Stephen Rea's career-worst performance, his spine apparently contracting into his ribcage and pulling his head down after it, as a mad-science technocrat bent on cloning the vampire-werewolf hybrid for a nefarious and genocidal purpose. Speedman never does materialise, except briefly as an upside-down body double. Apparently he's promised for the next instalment; but we've heard those promises from absent fathers before.

On the subject of Kate and her signature wardrobe, Hammer's surprise smash **THE WOMAN IN BLACK** makes a

spectacular mess of Susan Hill's cherished ghost story about a young lawyer tangling with a vengeful infanticidal spirit in an evocative coastal landscape of mudlands and tides. Jane Goldman's actual screenplay reads quite well, despite its scrambling of many of the novel's basic elements including the frame narrative, the ending, and the character and situation of the hero; while the boldly-cast Daniel Radcliffe is the right age for the book if not for the film (which has made Hill's chirpy, gung-ho young lawyer an already haunted widower with a son), and gives rather an effective sense of a too-young man plunged prematurely into a world of unmanageable adult responsibilities and pain. But once he arrives in Crithyn Gifford, he steps into a world of pent-up heritage-horror cliché that seems determined to compile the top tropes from Hammer's entire back catalogue: the dark inhospitable inn full of surly unwelcoming locals, where all they can reluctantly find you is a death-tainted attic room with creepy dolls and a toucan that makes you jump by yelling "Sea mist!"; the lowering trap-driver who delivers you to a heritage haunted house with dusty hall, portraited stairs, a mounted stag's head, a display of sensory-deprivation monkeys, and a nursery full of start-inducing animal automata, sinister music boxes, and the obligatory *Close Encounters* clockwork cymbal-monkey that plays by itself. No Victorian tat dealership has been left unstripped in dressing the sets, though the period setting is constantly undermined by tin-eared anachronisms of accent and manners. Goldman's new ending imposes two incongruously modern patterns of



The Woman in Black

resolution on ghost and hero in turn, and both at considerable cost to the crucial suspension of disbelief. Marco Beltrami's score is excellent and there are strong visual moments, including a wonderful shot of reflected candlelight in toys' glass eyes following you round the room, but the relentless multiplication of the book's quite sparingly modest jolts and creeps soon sucks all momentum out of the original story's slow-building scares. As a ghost film it's nothing like as atmospheric, well-played, and seriously creepy as last year's *The Awakening*, which troubled the box office hardly at all. Spooky.

In **GHOST RIDER: SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE**, Nicolas Cage returns to the Nicolas Cage performance that pretty much defines its genre, as the character with the power to mug so hard that his head catches fire, whereupon he will breathe the souls out of sinners with the halitosis of hell for the crimes that are on all our souls. ("You did something you wouldn't want the Rider to see: a white lie, an illegal download..." So repent, torrenters, or the studio will send Nic Cage to act you to hell.) This instalment has David Goyer among its screenwriters and Neveldine/Taylor directing, but you wouldn't know it apart from the weeing-fire joke from the trailer and a jolly routine at the climax where he commandeers an HGV and becomes the... *Ghost Trucker!!* Otherwise it's business as before, as Johnny Blaze is enlisted by Idris Elba with an outrageous French accent to prevent Ciarán Hinds' jowly Satan incarnate from downloading himself into



The Darkest Hour

his mortal bastard and bringing about the apocalypse or something. "Danny's the one good thing I ever did," laments his mum. "That being the case," drawls Nic, "we'd better make sure he doesn't turn out to be the Antichrist." And sure enough, a T2 relationship of surrogate father-son bonding springs up between the devil's child and the biker from hell, to take the place of his absent father of lies, and in the process "confess the one thing that is most difficult for you to talk about," which turns out to be about his origin story of saving his own dad. "I didn't do it for him; I made the deal for me. I couldn't let him go. It was selfish. He was ready to die." It's hard not to hear an echo here of the making of this film in the repeated discussion of the devil's "greatest power, the power of the Deal", and of the character one still can't help hearing self-described as "the writer": "So many times I've tried to keep the writer from coming out, but tonight I need him." Alas, to judge from dead-on-delivery lines like "The apple doesn't rot far from the tree", tonight the writer decided to stay home and watch *Strictly*.

In **THE DARKEST HOUR** interplanetary metal theft is the improbable trigger for a war of the worlds over Earth's mineral resources with energy beings armed with 12A-bloodless disintegrator rays, and a quartet of attractive young westerners find themselves among the survivors in ET-occupied Moscow without maps or phrasebooks, let alone weapons. Luckily they have a *positive attitude* which somehow makes up for a wilful disdain for language skills beyond the standard communicative



Chronicle

strategy of shouting slowly in English, and the Swedish rival who has stolen their contract by actually troubling to learn some business Russian is humiliated into serving as their translator before getting vaporised anyway and a cool blonde local teenager swapped into his job. American xenophobia, cultural insularity, and nervousness of overseas travel is ably coopted into the sense of isolation and dread, and the unpeopled and digitally bombed-out Moscow makes for a ravishing apocalyptic setting. But the plotline soon founders in a concatenation of stock invasion-flick tropes, and the film's flattering reassurance of its dumb-ass demographic is increasingly dispiriting, with a lot of fluff about kids' indomitable attitude somehow trumping the intelligent, highly skilled adults. "How can you be, like, delusionally optimistic all the time?" asks the smart, focussed, professional one of Emile Hirsch's charmless lead, who complains about having to put his game away as they come into land, and thinks Cyrillic looks like Klingon. It's 3D, dude. Simple.

The energies of youth are put to far more effective and unsettling use in **CHRONICLE**, whose Mark E Smithalike protagonist documents his uniformly miserable life of abuse at home and bullying at school, before powering up with the discovery of an alien cave thing that gives him and his two cooler mates telekinetic powers, which they train up from manipulating small objects to the power of flight itself, and ultimately to city-trashing mayhem hurling trucks through buildings. The inspired contrivance of the premise

invigorates the found-footage genre by enabling its characters to move and zoom the camera remotely, with an increasing cinematographic fluency and sophistication that mirrors the growth of their control. But genre scion Max Landis and his director/co-storyist Josh Trank have also thought cleverly about other ways to open up the form, gradually introducing other cameras into the cut until the climactic urban rampage spliced together from a dazzling assemblage of security and crowd-sourced footage. The effect is one of artful escalation from low-key, handheld, claustrophobic indie melancholy to popcorn-spilling stops-out superaction, editing deftly past the frankly incredible gaps in motivation, plausibility, and footage sourcing. It's not much of a spoiler to say that, of the original trio of larking besties, one goes sticky-end-up and one goes very very bad, or that the film's main power supply lies in the neatly ramped-up sense of dread at the looming inevitability of a horrible turn for the worst, heavily trailed in ominously optimistic lines like "Today was the best day of my life!" and "I was really worried for you before, and now things are going to get so much better for you." An impressive calling card for all involved, it's so tightly and smartly made that you scarcely notice the strange dressing of South African locations as Vancouver dressed as Seattle; and it's the one film of the crop to take a grittily 2D home-movie view of familial breakdown and what it risks doing to a vulnerable, sympathetic teen with the unfortunate power to turn anger into vengeance. For all those disappointing dads, a dark and dreadful reckoning awaits. ♦

BOOK ZONE

DARK EDEN
Chris Beckett

review and interview by Jim Steel

IN THE MOUTH OF THE WHALE
Paul McAuley

review by Elaine Gollagher

GIANT THIEF
David Tallerman

review by Huwren Kinnaird Speller

THE WILD GIRLS
Ursula K. Le Guin

review by Juliet E. McKenna

SENSATION
Nick Mamatas

review by Nathaniel Topley

BABYLON STEEL
Gaie Sebold

review by Lawrence Osburn

THEME PLANET
Andy Remic

review by Stephen Thacker

INTRUSION
Ken MacLeod

review by Paul F. Cockburn

FROM ELVISH TO KLINGON
Edited by Michael Adams

review by Lara Buckerton

DARK EDEN
Chris Beckett

Corvus, 404pp, £18.99 hb

Human beings, in general, are pretty amazing things. People – some of them, at least – will do pretty much anything to survive. This means that we are highly unlikely to become extinct as a species. The downside of our experimental adaptability, however, is our potential for evil and the real challenge is to retain our humanity.

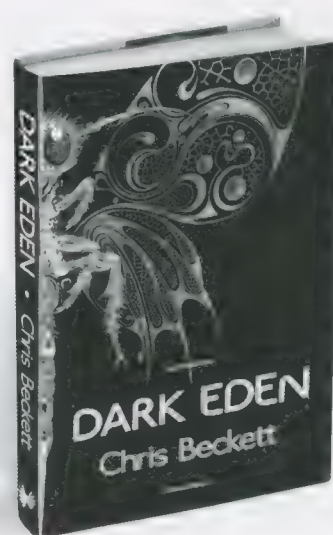
The crew of the *Bounty* set sail with their Tahitian consorts and wrecked themselves on Pitcairn, hoping that their flight would hide them from retribution. It was a very similar situation with the crew of a stolen starship in Chris Beckett's new novel. Unlike the *Bounty*, however, there is very little chance of another expedition finding them again unless the starship made it back to Earth to summon help for the survivors left behind. And given that there were only two people left behind, man and woman both, would Earth even bother to send out a prohibitively expensive ship several generations later just on the off-chance that there would be living descendants? It is not giving away too much when I say that we will be spending a lot of time on Eden.

Eden itself is the strangest of planets. At some time in its past it has been ejected from the plane of the Milky Way and now drifts above it, alone and dark. It is geologically active enough to keep the surface at a temperature that is acceptable to humans, but not so active that they fry. Bioluminescent life has had time to evolve, some of which is edible (and presumably includes vitamin D), and the world's name is not entirely sarcastic. The small enclave of humans has bred until it numbers in the hundreds and their little valley is, in fact, beginning to get overpopulated.

As is customary with Beckett, the

viewpoint is an integral part of the narrative. Each chapter has a different narrator; mostly we get John Redlantern, the teenage visionary, or Tina Spiketree, his friend, but we get others as well. The descendants are unsurprisingly suffering from inbreeding with a high proportion of harelips and crippled feet expressing themselves in the gene pool. Some of the characters are not the brightest of people either, but it is harder to say if this proportion is any different to ours. As with any society, conflict arises between progressives and conservatives, and our science-fictional sympathies lie with the progressives. John Redlantern takes a small band of followers away in search of a new life, but even leaving poses a threat to the worldview of the conservatives. Conflict is inevitable.

The ecology is both dangerous and beautiful. Singing, six-legged snow leopards are as fascinating as they are lethal. The term 'leopard' is, of course analogous; the myths of Earth have ceased to provide a comparison and now are largely ciphers. Metal might be recognisable since they still have a few small relics from the time of the landing, but electricity is a puzzle. Early on it is mentioned, offhandedly, that schooling has been sacrificed in order to spend more time in the search for food. The reader feels the loss more than the characters, although as we progress we realise that this may be a blessing in disguise. One of the characters makes a conceptual breakthrough and starts to domesticate animals using his notion of what a horse might be, but it becomes increasingly obvious that these people badly need to start afresh. A whole new world awaits.



Courtesy of Corvus we have five copies of *Dark Eden* to give away. Simply email your name and address to iz239competitions@ttapress.com before the closing date of 31st March. Winners will be announced on the forum.

CHRIS BECKETT: THE GATES OF EDEN

Review & Interview by Jim Steel

As the title demonstrates, the Genesis myth is something of an obvious parallel (there's even a snake/tree motif). Did you drive towards that or steer away from it? There could, for example, have been more than two founders in another version.

I wanted to write about a new society on a new world, descended from just two people, so that it would be quite literally a single family (because one of the things this book is about is families). I also knew that at the core of the story would be an act of transgression. The parallel with the Genesis myth was right there. Plus I wanted the world to be beautiful, which was why its discoverers called it by that name.

From there on, I don't think I either deliberately drove towards, or pulled away from, the original myth. I just went with my instincts and with the characters. It's surprising (and rather wonderful) how much of the work is done almost unconsciously, once the story is underway. The serpent/tree bit that you refer to, for instance, came into my head at that stage in the story, and it just felt right. I didn't think "Now I'm going to insert a reference to the biblical Garden of Eden".

You've used a grammatically precise but slightly degenerate language in the first-person narratives of your characters. Was this because you feel that six generations wouldn't be long enough for language to drift into a new form or was it because there was a risk of overloading the reader with what is already a very alien world?



You've got it. I made some small changes in the language by way of acknowledging and representing the fact that language shift would have occurred, and just to make things feel a bit different. I'm fairly sure that, in reality, after all that time in isolation, in a small group and without a written language to stabilise things, the shift would actually have been more pronounced, but I didn't want the language to slow the reader down. Incidentally, somewhere in the back of my mind was the idea that, at the beginning, the family would have consisted of just the two parents and their five kids. I felt that language would have got a bit more childish at that point. (You know how when people have kids, they start using childish words even when the kids aren't with them?)

Eden is a beautifully constructed world. How much scientific research has gone into it?

Cheers, Jim!

No systematic scientific research went into it, but I am reasonably scientifically literate, at least when it comes to stuff like evolutionary biology, and I've been thinking about Eden for a long time. I first described it in an *Interzone* short story ('The Circle of Stones') published in 1992. This was a sort of prototype: it included earlier, but very different versions of John and his three main friends. I described it again in the short story, also called 'Dark Eden', which appeared in *Asimov's* in 2006, which was a version of the backstory for the present novel.

It often irritates me when science fiction writers invent animals and life forms which are obviously biologically implausible. Everything about a real animal is functional, or at least is a vestige of something that was functional, and everything about it must have an evolutionary history: that is, it must have evolved from something else that was itself functional. You don't design a plausible animal or plant just by dreaming up weird stuff. Not that plausibility necessarily has to be the criterion of course. But in a story that purports to a degree of realism you need to at least nod in the direction of plausibility.

I worked out for myself what I thought was a plausible history for the evolution of life on the planet Eden. This is a planet with no sun. We think about life on Earth as all being powered by sunlight, and most of it is, but even on Earth there are

"It often irritates me when science fiction writers invent animals and life forms which are obviously biologically implausible"

geothermal ecosystems on the sea bed, that live in complete darkness, in the warm, mineral rich water round volcanic vents. I decided that if a life form evolved on Eden that could pump liquid water from underground hot spots up to the surface, there was no reason in principle why even a sunless plant should not have a warm and liveable-on surface, with these life forms (in Eden they are just called trees) acting in effect as radiators, and thereby providing themselves with opportunities to interbreed and propagate that they wouldn't otherwise have had. I felt very pleased with myself subsequently when, after thinking all this through for myself, I read that sunless but liveable-on planets are thought to be scientifically possible. Though I've no doubt at all that someone will point out logical flaws and impossibilities in the one I have actually devised!

For me, *Dark Eden* stands with such creations as Brian Aldiss' *Helliconia* and James Blish's *Surface Tension* as examples of humanity standing alone. What were your influences?

Well, I love *Helliconia* and admire it, so thanks very much. I think *Helliconia* is a masterpiece of world-building, and it was certainly a conscious influence: I learnt a lot from it about how you build a really gorgeous and convincing world. (Possibly his *Hothouse* and *Nonstop* may have had a bit of an influence as well.) I've never read *Surface Tension*, but it sounds like I should. Other conscious influences on this book were Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. But there must be loads of other books and stories that gave me ideas of one sort or another, some of which I'm aware of, some which I haven't spotted myself.

The last time we interviewed you (in 2008) you said that you had completed *Dark Eden*. Publishing can be a lengthy business, particularly in volatile times such as these. Is the *Dark Eden* that we see now essentially the same one as you had then?

I had finished the book then in the sense of having written and put through several

revisions a complete manuscript, which included the entire story you have since read. However, Corvus' editorial input was very helpful and constructive. I didn't agree with or follow every suggestion they made by any means, and I didn't change the overall story, but there was a stimulating dialogue and the result of that dialogue was further several rewrites and a longer (by about 50%!) and better book. I think what happened essentially is that they coaxed me out of my habits as a short story writer. "You won't bore people if you spend more time on things or include more details," was a large part of the message, "we like the details." It was a very liberating one. I love inventing details. And since no one has yet reported being bored by excessive detail in the book, it was obviously sound advice. So let me record my thanks here to Nic Cheetham and Mathilda Imlah, then at Corvus.

It took *The Holy Machine* six years after its first publication before it was published in the UK, while your latest, *Dark Eden*, received its first publication here. *Marcher*, however, is the most overtly British of your novels (it's set in England for a start) but has yet to see publication in the UK. If anything, it is more relevant now than when it was first published. Is it scheduled for publication here?

Sadly, not as yet. I'm very proud of *Marcher*. As it now exists in print in the cheaply-produced Cosmos edition, it is not well-served by the absence of editorial input or even proofreading, though. I'd really love to see a properly finished version in print, and perhaps a version that had benefited from the kind of challenging but supportive editorial advice that I had for *Dark Eden*.

What effect has winning the Edge Hill Short Fiction Award had on your career?

A huge effect. Firstly, psychological. It was a big boost to my sense of myself as a writer. I felt validated. Secondly, practical. It was on the back of that, that John Jarrold, my agent, was able to interest publishers – commercial publishers who pay actual money – in taking on my novels.

How has your growing literary success affected your other career?

I'm a university lecturer in social work. (In fact I've published more books on social work than I've published books of fiction!) So that's my day job. But I have cut it down

to part-time since I signed the contract with Corvus. It can be difficult juggling two such different activities, though there are benefits too in moving between two different places and having each as time out from the other.

All of your novels (so far) have their roots in your short fiction. *Dark Eden* has a prequel of the same name, for example. Have you thought of going in the other direction and carving short stories from the body of your novels? Is there anything else planned for Eden?

I would like to write two full-length sequels for *Dark Eden*, allowing the society of Eden to evolve over a few more centuries, and in fact have work underway on this, though I don't want to discuss it much more at this point.

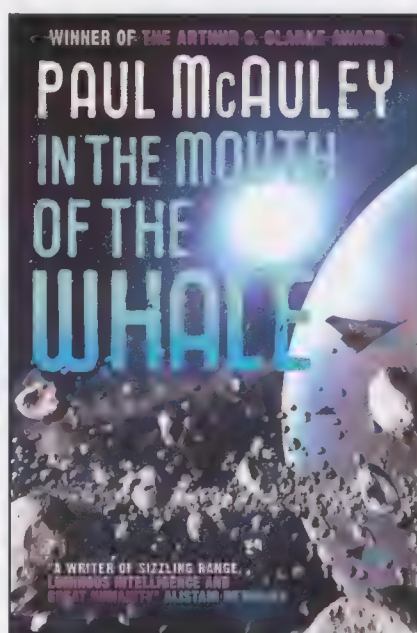
Yes, I have thought of trying to write other short stories set in Eden, though so far, since writing the book itself, I haven't completed one. There's certainly potential there, though I wonder whether I might feel cramped, taking Eden back into the short story form, when it's become so expansive. I wonder whether that's why, even though the idea has occurred to me, I've never yet done anything with it. We'll see.

What are you working on now? Should we be searching your short stories for clues to your next novel?

I'm working on Eden sequels, albeit at quite an early stage.

You're right, all three of my published novels have evolved from short stories. There's a pretty long gestation period, though, *Dark Eden's* being the longest of all, since it goes back twenty years! (The catalyst for starting the book, incidentally, was when my youngest daughter, Nancy, saw my short story with the same name, and said "That would be a great title for a book." She's a very astute person. I started almost at once!)

I don't know if any other novels will evolve from my existing short stories, but I have recently written two stories set on the planet Lutania ('The Caramel Forest' and 'Day 29' which appeared in *Asimov's*), and I'm finding it quite fruitful territory. It was triggered by reading a strange, and very hard to read, novel by the Strugatsky brothers *The Snail on the Slope*, and by Stanislaw's *Solaris*. So who knows? But that would be some time down the track if it happens. I'm committed to Eden for a while yet.



IN THE MOUTH OF THE WHALE

Paul McAuley

Gollancz, 384pp, £14.99 tpb

Reviewed by Elaine Gallagher

In the Mouth of the Whale tells three stories set in a war for the future of humanity and its descendants, in and around far-future colonies orbiting Fomalhaut.

The first, about the Child, is a literal reconstruction of her by her many-times-removed descendants, the crew of a slow colony ship approaching the star.

The second, Isak's, is the reminiscences of a warrior-librarian, fighting information demons to recover history that has been corrupted during the war and tracing a secret that will change the outcome for all the factions.

The remaining story is of Ori, one of the Quick, the first colonists, who have been enslaved by the later-arriving True humans. The Trues are in turn at war with the invading post-human Ghosts. Ori has a worm's-eye view of the conflict as she is invaded by a Sprite, a disembodied intelligence, is subjected to experimentation by the Trues, and then sent to fight in the war as cannon fodder.

This is the third novel in Paul McAuley's future history series, which began with *The Quiet War* and continued with *The Gardens of the Sun*. I had not read the previous two, but this book stands on its own sufficiently without them. The Child's story, set in the 22nd Century just prior to the Quiet War, provides enough background that her

position in the present context is made clear. I think *In the Mouth of the Whale* will reward re-reading when I have read the previous books.

The major theme of the book is change. Isak and Ori both mature as a result of their experiences; Ori emerges as a leader of her people and Isak helps to overthrow the ossified True leadership and free the Quick slaves. The True Humans are a faction that deliberately rejects the developments of the advanced societies, including the Quick, with which they are contrasted. The Child's story is of her earliest attempts to alter herself so that she will never die, while the Sprite is a catalyst for Ori, marking her as a target for both her True masters and the Ghosts and forcing her through her experiences to take charge for herself and her people.

The novel also takes swipes at traditionalist outlooks; in particular the Trues are cruel, brutal, clannish, authoritarian, refuse to allow their forces to learn by experience, and kill their Quick slaves out of petty malice. They are governed by Our Thing, which is the English translation of the Mafia's name for itself.

Isak begins his story subject to the spite of his clan elders, who are either determined never to change their opinions of him or unable to change as they are dead and existing in a simulated afterlife. In the oligarchic society of the Child's upbringing, women have been relegated to being subject to men and she struggles to undermine the influence of her widowed mother's suitor and to retain her own independence. Ori comes into conflict with Quick who are afraid of change and support the authority of the True rather than act for themselves.

In the Mouth of the Whale is complex and while it works overall, it is not perfect. The Sprite does nothing but observe events from behind Ori's eyes until the point where it acts as a Deus ex Machina, happily for Ori but with no clear rationale for itself.

The book is also slow and distanced in the beginning, dwelling on the Child's early childhood as if it is a legend and then dumping her adult background from the previous books on her and the reader so that the climax can happen in what feels like a couple of pages. However, given the themes of growth and change in the novel, the conclusion is satisfying and open-ended, and looks to a future that is much stranger than anything that has previously been seen.



GIANT THIEF David Tallerman

Angry Robot, 384pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

The ambiguity implied in this novel's title – is the thief a giant or has he stolen one? – extends to the narrative itself. The story begins thrillingly, with the protagonist, Easie Damasco, petty thief and conman, about to be hanged by mercenaries for stealing from a baggage train. The suspense is hard to bear, or would be if it weren't already blatantly obvious, given that this is the beginning of the novel, that Easie Damasco will survive his ordeal. Certainly, he doesn't seem like a man given to extensive narrative flashback and if all this weren't enough of a clue, the novel's subtitle, 'From the Tales of Easie Damasco' suggests that we haven't seen the last of him, and all this before we've even been properly introduced. One can all too easily imagine an older Damasco, hunched over a tavern fire, trotting out a few well-polished yarns for the price of a drink. One wonders too what those other tales will be like, because, in truth, there isn't much of a story here, and if this is his best one, it doesn't bode well for the rest.

Damasco gives the impression of being an inept thief who all too easily blunders into trouble before sitting back and letting events take their course. Rarely does he take action on his own account, unless he is directly threatened, and even then he



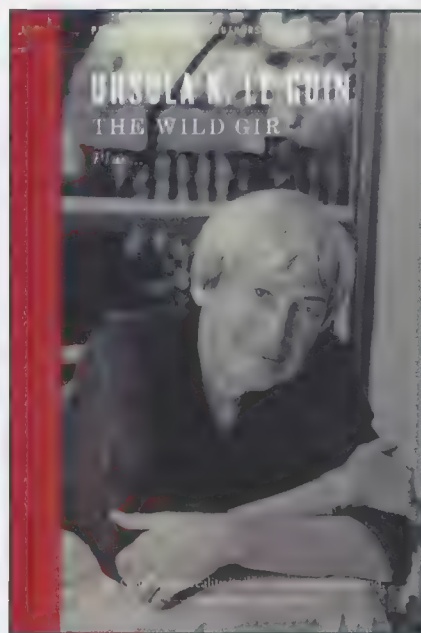
prefers to disentangle himself from the consequences as fast as possible, leaving others to clear up the mess.

Damasco is not a man to own his problems if he can palm them off on someone else. Even the 'theft' of the giant,

Salt Lick, is an accident, and Damasco's main aim is to ditch him as fast as possible. For Damasco, Salt Lick is little more than a meat machine, capable of absorbing and delivering huge amounts of damage. It is left to others to recognise Salt Lick as a sentient being who is suffering and to deal with him accordingly. Unfortunately, the reader sees all of this through Damasco's eyes, and for him there is evidently no problem with his attitude.

And here we reach the heart of the problem. If a novel must have a first-person narrator, it would help if he were more interested in what is going on around him than Damasco seems to be. Mainly driven by very basic impulses, to find food, drink, some decent clothes and a soft bed, he is rarely inclined to scale greater heights of reflection or self-examination in his story-telling. By all means let him be a shiftless wastrel with few redeeming features but to then have him tell the story is to leave the reader mostly out of touch with what's going on. It is difficult to negotiate the political background to the war that is breaking out around Damasco when he has very little interest in what is happening, except insofar as it inconveniences him. By the same token, the reader has no access to Salt Lick's view of the world, a great pity as Salt Lick is, as even Damasco belatedly comes to realise, probably the most interesting character in the novel, though Marina Estrada, freedom fighter, undoubtedly runs him a close second.

In the end, one is left with the feeling that *Giant Thief* contains a potentially engaging novel, if only it had been told from a completely different viewpoint. The other characters seem much more involved than Easie Damasco so why choose to tell the story from the point of view of the most supine and disaffected among them in what is clearly intended to be an adventure? For all that I am interested in the progress of Salt Lick, if I am only ever to see him through the eyes of Easie Damasco, I am not sufficiently inspired to linger for more of these tales.



THE WILD GIRLS Ursula K. Le Guin

PM Press, 102pp, \$12.00 pb

Reviewed by Juliet E. McKenna

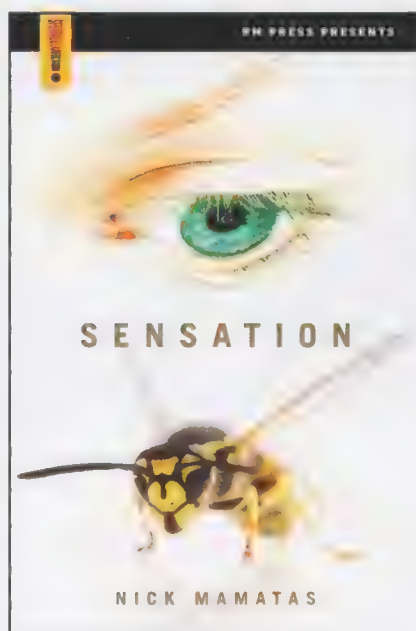
I consider this book excellent value for Le Guin fans and for anyone interested in writing, irrespective of genre. The Nebula Award winning story 'The Wild Girls' is followed by an article 'Staying Awake While We Read', some poems, another article 'The Conversation of the Modest', then an interview 'A Lovely Art', followed by a bibliography and short biography. It's soon clear that this eclectic material has been carefully selected and ordered for maximum coherence and impact.

'The Wild Girls' story returns fantasy to its folklore roots through clarity of language and the omniscient third person viewpoint so little used in these days of 'show, don't tell' and too often reduced to an unconvincingly remote series of events. Le Guin manages this challenging style with effortless grace, engaging the reader's emotions with the undeserved sufferings of the innocent, and more impressively with those who cause such suffering. The intensely personal motives which drive these people enable us to understand them even amid their incomprehensibly archaic world. While this brief tale of two kidnapped girls enslaved by a patriarchal society is written with lucid simplicity, it is not a simple story. The complexity of all the characters' lives becomes apparent through successive revelations about the

different societies of the city and of the nomads. Slaves do not necessarily bemoan or rebel against their lot. The elites can be imprisoned by the strictures of their caste. Not that Le Guin explains the origins of customs and superstitions any more than she outlines their wider world. There's no need for this story's purposes, and moreover this absence of knowledge draws the reader towards the underlying theme of the perils of ignorance. The story also shows how knowledge isn't a prerequisite for recognising injustice. As the slave girls grow and marry in an absence of romance though not of love, they discover how they might influence those who control their lives. Thus Le Guin's story meditates on the role of luck and chance in life as well as unintended consequences and whether or not individuals are rewarded or punished according to what they deserve. Punished by whom? What are our expectations of narrative as opposed to our expectations of reality? How does our experience of story inform our daily lives for good or ill? In forty five pages, this is one of the most-thought provoking tales I've read in ages.

The articles and interviews thereafter suggest answers to some of those questions while prompting readers to ask more of themselves. In 'Staying Awake While We Read' Le Guin explores mankind's relationship with story through changing ages of education and literacy, making a compelling case against the commoditisation of books. Capitalism demands unbridled growth. In nature that means obesity or cancer. The consequences for the literary world are equally unwelcome. While we're reflecting on that, a handful of poems offer another master class on how much complexity of modern life can be distilled to essentials through the correct, carefully chosen few words. Not necessarily offering answers; I'm still rereading 'Variations on an Old Theme' in search of full understanding, while accepting it may not be there to be found.

'The Conversation of the Modest' explores the differences between modesty, humility and pride in relation to gender hierarchy in the modern west and also artistic endeavour and merit. If that sounds daunting, never fear. It's as articulate and entertaining as the interview by Terry Bisson where again Le Guin shows how to say so much by saying so little. The concluding bibliography and biography summarise the breadth and depth of her work and rightly extol her many achievements. But only after her writing has spoken first.



SENSATION

Nick Mamatas

PM Press, 208pp, £10.99 pb

Reviewed by Nathaniel Tapley

You should read *Sensation* now. I'm not kidding. Right now. Stop reading this, start reading *Sensation*. Anyone still here for this sentence has failed themselves.

Nick Mamatas' novel is a razor-sharp look at the modern world. It's bafflingly current and important. It's as if he foresaw the Occupy movement before the first tents went up. The lack of stated aims, the surplus of enthusiasm, and the taste for dramatic public statements exploited through social media are all there. As I read the book in early December of 2011, it was clear that Mamatas has a firm grasp of the modern world. Around its throat.

There are wasps that lay their eggs in caterpillars, changing their behaviour so that even as the wasp larvae chew their way out of them to pupate, the caterpillars stand guard over those for whom they are just a fat, green larder. There are other wasps that lay their eggs in spiders, forcing them to weave a special web on which they can build a cocoon. In the world of *Sensation* there are wasps that lay their eggs in humans, forcing them to act for the good of wasps rather than people. In the world of *Sensation*, that explains a lot of human history.

Sensation presents an ongoing war between parasitic wasps (*Hymenopimecis* sp.), and the species of spider that loathes

them. The spiders spin humans of indeterminate ethnicity out of webbing to ride around in, and do their best to foil the wasps' plans. The wasps lay eggs inside people, and control their behaviour. Either manipulated by spiders or mind-altered by ovipositing wasps, the future doesn't look particularly bright for the human race.

But then, as the novel hints, it probably shouldn't. The book savages the hopes, the pretensions, the self-importance, and the ridiculousness of the first world at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It's a pitiless look at human beings, and is both hilarious and perspicacious.

The book captivated me from the moment it had a protest movement spawned by a They Might Be Giants lyric (I shan't tell you which one). It's the first of many examples of the bizarre and the profound being in close proximity. Mamatas expertly combines pop culture with satire with really good jokes.

Its wit is razor-sharp, and it will be a lucky reader who escapes without cutting themselves on its barbs. From aging Gen-Xers to lefty hipsters to federal agents, Mamatas has seen you, he's understood you, and here you are in the service of parasitic hymenoptera. Or their arachnid foes.

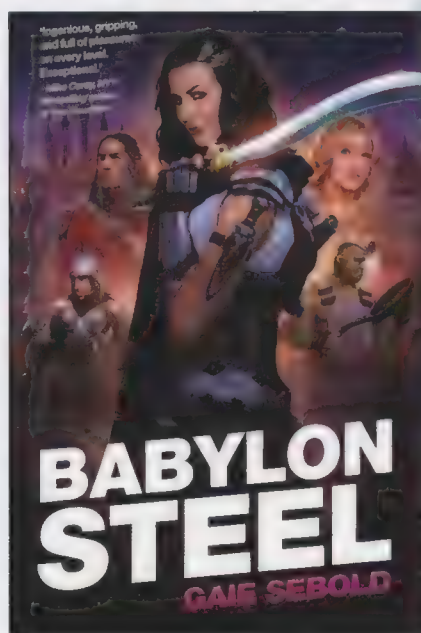
There's so much to love in this book: its playfulness, its following of a relentless dream-logic, the feeling that this is genre fiction's answer to De Lillo or Pynchon. However, space opera, it is not. It's a knowing, brilliant look at the world through a satirical conceit. It is science fiction in the way *Gulliver's Travels* is, or *Stranger in a Strange Land* is, or *1984* is.

If you're looking for titanic space battles between futuristic civilisations, you won't find them. If you're looking for well-developed alien cultures on exciting new worlds, you won't find them. If you're looking for straightforward narrative prose from an omniscient narrator, you won't find it. You'll find in *Sensation* something more exciting. And a race of sentient, kick-ass spiders in human costumes made of webbing.

It's a fun book. It's like Lester Bangs whacking the *X-Files* in the back of the neck with a spade, and then burying the corpse in a grave lined with newspaper clippings from 2011. It's probably the best explanation of 2011 that we've had yet.

If you're still reading this, and you didn't go and do it earlier, go and do it now. Read *Sensation* now. Right now. I'm still not kidding. It's all right, I'll wait...

See? Told you.

**BABYLON STEEL****Gaie Sebold**

Solaris, 431pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Lawrence Osborn

At first glance Gaie Sebold's debut novel is a piece of traditional fantasy. It certainly has many of the trappings of high fantasy: strange, magical creatures; swords and sorcery (though the latter is somewhat limited in Scalentine, the city/world at the heart of the novel); gods and demons. However, she is not averse to shaking things up a little. For example, the best chef in Scalentine is a large green troll-like creature by the name of Flower.

The novel is very much about its central character, Babylon Steel, a whore with a heart of gold (a trope with tremendous potential for cliché that Sebold nimbly manages to avoid) who runs a high-class brothel in the city of Scalentine. She also happens to be an ex-mercenary and, in another world, was once the avatar of a goddess of whores and common soldiers.

Sebold actually presents us with several interlocking stories in this volume. It opens with Babylon facing financial difficulties. She has a large tax bill to pay and a religious sect is frightening away her clients. So when the mysterious Darask Fain offers to pay her to look for an aristocratic runaway from another world she can't say no. Meanwhile a serial killer has started targeting prostitutes in the city. As if things couldn't get any worse, Babylon's past catches up with her, and she



is eventually forced to deal with certain things she has been running away from.

Babylon's past plays an important part in the structure of the novel. In fact, her life up to the point where she escapes from her home world of Tiresana is summarised in a series of flashbacks

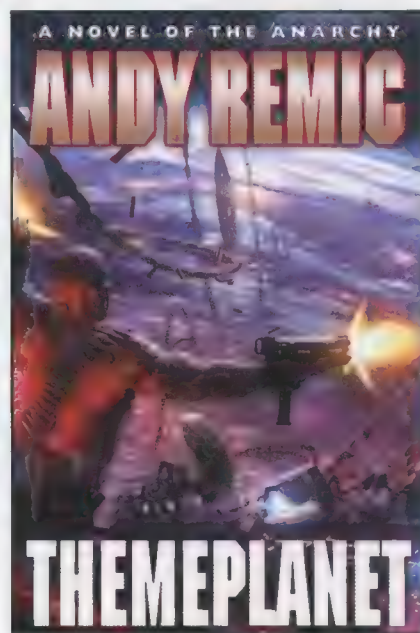
that break up the main storyline. That could have been irritating, but Sebold handles the material deftly (which is more than can be said for Solaris' decision to format the flashbacks in italics).

Having said that *Babylon Steel* looks and feels like high fantasy, it could equally well be described as urban fantasy. The city of Scalentine is far more than a mere backdrop to Babylon's activities. In a sense, the city is an additional character in the novel. And that character is vividly drawn: to my mind, it came across as a strangely convincing conflation of the London of Dickens and Dodge City! It is believably gritty, a rough trading centre with streets that are most definitely not paved with gold.

Sebold's world-building skills are impressive. In addition to her very believable city, I particularly like the way the cosmos she has created consists of many different worlds locked together by portals. Another interesting aspect of her world-building is the part played by religion. At one level, thanks to Babylon's very clear antipathy to religious practitioners, Sebold presents religion as an oppressive fraud. But, at another level, there is something real behind it: the force that ultimately helps Babylon overcome the avatars.

Given that the story is about an ex-mercenary engaged in some freelance detective work and facing up to the darker side of her own past, it is not surprising to find that there is plenty of action, some with swords, rather less with sorcery. And, since Babylon runs a brothel, there are the inevitable sex scenes. These prove to be surprisingly tasteful; they are not smutty, nor are they particularly erotic; they simply form an essential part of the story given what we know of its central character.

I found this a very satisfying read. It may be a first novel, but it is a very assured piece of work. Gaie Sebold is definitely a name to watch in future.

**THEME PLANET****Andy Remic**

Solaris, 384pp, £7.99 pb

Reviewed by Stephen Theaker

Dexter Colls needs a holiday. Investigating some shady business going down in the rough side of town, he was lucky to avoid being blown up, and it's starting to get to him. Where else would a family man take his adoring wife and more or less adoring kids but Theme Planet: it's better than drugs, better than sex, and "if you haven't been sick, you soon will be!" Rollercoasters stand five kilometres high and plunge an equal distance beneath the waves.

A reluctant Dex slowly unwinds, encouraged by his family's enthusiasm, and it's shaping up to be the holiday of a lifetime – until he wakes to find Katrina, Molly and Toffee missing from the hotel. Thus begins an orgy of mindless violence that won't stop for wine, cheese and Spunky Spunk Chocolate until he gets them back.

Dexter's not the only one rampaging on Theme Planet: android Amba Miskalov's mission is to eliminate six key PR people. Given the ease with which she kills a squad of machine gunners in the opening pages, you wouldn't expect any mission to give her too much trouble, but she has two problems to contend with: her own growing resentment at the way she's being employed and treated, and a mysterious female voice inside her head. Between them Amba and Dex will rack

up an impressive body count, but it's a conversation between them, not a fight, that will decide the future of every man, woman, child, alien, android and SIM on the planet.

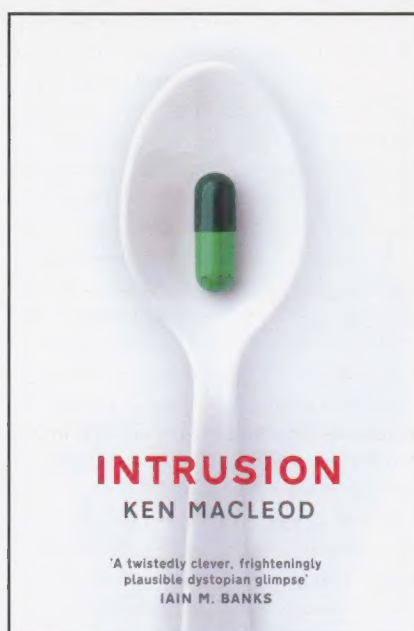
Though dedicated to Philip K. Dick, this novel's approach to the questions of identity raised in novels such as *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* essentially amounts to, "Oh, I'm an android. I must be evil. What to do?" This is Dick through the eyes of Paul Verhoeven, not Ridley Scott, the novel a close relation to *Total Recall*. I love the Schwarzenegger films of that period, and I wish there were more of them, but what thrills over two hours can tire over ten. The pace in this novel never lets up, and some readers may find themselves slowing to a jog, waving for it to go on without them.

On the whole it's much better than the last Remic I read. The Fanthorpsisms and non sequiturs that marred *Vampire Warlords* (or provided its principle pleasures, perhaps) are generally absent, though one rhapsodic passage would make Lionel proud: a "mammoth ball of blue, [...] a caring Mother, the Earth, Mother Earth, Home of Mankind and Cradle of Humanity".

The novel begins a new series, *The Anarchy*, and in comparison to the NaNoWriMo-esque *Vampire Warlords* feels like a decent amount of effort has gone into it. That's not to say it will win awards for its prose. The word "vast", for example, is used so frequently – about sixty times – that it starts to seem like an in-joke. Theme Planet itself is not just "vast", it's "VAST"!

Thirty-nine uses of "bitch" seems almost parsimonious in comparison, but point to the book's main problem, a distaste for women and their bodies, especially if they are fat. It's a book where a woman sighs over her baby-stretched "undercarriage" and her husband jokes about her vibrator in front of their daughter; where having your face pushed between the thighs of a sweaty fat woman is worse than being shot, and where Dex and his partner burst from a doorway "like unwanted foetal ejections from the glowing vulva of an alien whore".

By most standards this isn't a good book, but I don't think it wants to be. It's aiming to be big dumb fun, a videogame on paper, and in that it mainly succeeds. The violence is as bloody and frequent as people who like bloody and frequent violence might hope, and despite its flaws and daftness I enjoyed most of its attempts to entertain. But by the end I was ready to move on.



INTRUSION Ken MacLeod

Orbit, 388pp, £18.99 hb

Reviewed by Paul F. Cockburn

To paraphrase John Donne, none of us are islands. The ongoing struggle to find an agreeable balance between personal independence and notions of community has been at the heart of much social and political strife down history – and also, it must be said, the fiction of Ken MacLeod.

At the start of *Intrusion* MacLeod introduces us to Hope Morrison, a mother expecting her second child who – for reasons even she's not clear about – refuses to take "the Fix", a "complex of gene-correcting machinery made up into a simple tablet which, when swallowed during pregnancy, fixes the errors in the baby's genome, and confers immunity to almost all childhood ailments". Following a legal judgement which suggests that *not* taking the Fix is tantamount to wilful neglect of the unborn child, Hope comes under increasing pressure – from friends, from medical and social services, even local politicians – to take the Fix, or at least to explain her reasons for not doing so. As with other conscientious objectors down history, just saying no isn't good enough.

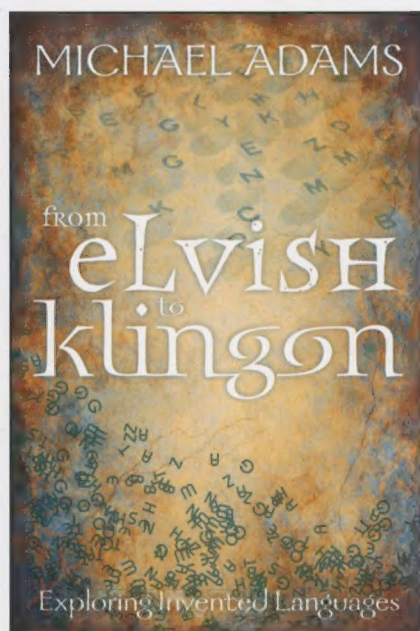
Such a level of intrusion by the community into the choices of the individual is already notable in MacLeod's deftly described day-after-tomorrow scenario, where (for example) the implementation of presumably well-intended health

legislation (along with more intentional tweaks to the tax system) has effectively driven most women back into the home – even if, courtesy of the world wide web, they still can work remotely.

Hope's husband, Hugh, is supportive of her choice not to take the Fix, but he has intrusions of his own to deal with. Since childhood, he has experienced phantom-like images of what appear to be ancient humans; indeed, during one childhood exploration of a sunken shaft, he believes he somehow travelled into an alternate time and place. So, when the pressures on his family begin to loom, he chooses to flee London, where he and Hope live, and return to his parents on the Isle of Lewis, but with the back-up plan of using the shaft as the ultimate escape route. When events come to a climax, both he and Hope soon learn just how violently the State can suddenly and mercilessly intrude on individuals who don't tow the line.

MacLeod has a reputation for using the literary tools of hard SF and space opera to explore socialist, communist and anarchist political ideas. *Intrusion* is sufficiently in this line to keep regular readers happy, even if some briefly introduced characters (such as Hope's local MP Jack Crow) arguably intrude on the narrative as tell-not-show methods of getting across some political points. However, the author's choice of showing a world already changed by synthetic biology is significant, not least because, allied with the book's very near future setting, it would seem to make it easier for his publisher to promote it as literary rather than science fiction. It may also explain the notable intrusions of a strong authorial voice; for example, when the book humorously explains "the Science Bit" early on.

MacLeod creates a frighteningly plausible dystopia but, in at least one respect, there is an overt blind spot, and it's not entirely clear if it's deliberate. From reading this book you might well come to believe that the only people who might object to anything like the Fix would do so on religious grounds, but it's arguable that many disabled people, especially those affected by congenital disorders, might well object to the "correction" (and therefore the removal) of conditions and impairments that they have come to view as intrinsic to their individual identities. Deliberately or not, *Intrusion* shows a world where a societal definition of normal has wiped disability off the face of the Earth. And that, perhaps, is the scariest thing of all.



**FROM ELVISH TO KLINGON:
EXPLORING INVENTED
LANGUAGES**

Edited by Michael Adams
Oxford University Press, 304pp, £12.99 hb

Reviewed by Lara Buckerton

I wouldn't want to jam Zionist anti-Yiddish struggles, radix-happy C17th stabs at Adamic reference, Esperanto's antecedent Volapük, Burgess's Nadsat misfits, nor Beckett's Worstward Ho weirdo between "Elvish" and "Klingon"...so this collection really ranges wider than is suggested by its title (although Paul Muldoon is defo a level 4 drow). It's a grand ol' grab-bag, stuffed with eight essays (including introduction) plus eight responses (some commentaries, some more in the spirit of "yeah that reminds me", and some li'l baby anthologies in themselves) by editor Professor Michael Adams. As Wil'yam Shex'pir put it "in the original Klingon" (255-6), "mu', mu', mu'" (Khamlet, Act II, Scene 2).

The approaches are also various – from the rock-solid academia of Arden R. Smith and Stephen Watt, to the more bloggerish, Tiggerish musings of James Portnow. Though Portnow's style of thought is apt given his essay's subject – "From Gargish to [337]" (doesn't Net geekdom have its own ecology of intellectual legitimacy, partly insulated from that of the academy?) – I have a niggly with his Saussure paraphrase. Portnow gives the guru's principle of arbitrary signification as: "words [...] have

no bearing on the real world; they mean nothing unless a group of people agree that they do". Now to me "no bearing on the real world" suggests confidence in the existence of an extra-linguistic reality, and "agree that they do" suggests that languages can be thought of as contracts which establish how to communicate about this reality.

But Saussure's legacy is largely built on his attack on these connected assumptions – he argued our worlds are segmented and laden with value through languages and other complex systems of interdependent signs; individuals "encounter" these systems as an irresistible fait accompli, without exits, and which they are powerless – almost powerless – to alter.

Other essays explore the wiggle room that "almost" affords. E.S.C. Weiner and Jeremy Marshall delve into Tolkien's elves, who are "aware of the whole of their language at every moment" (106) and "will introduce a sound change throughout the language 'as a weaver might change a thread from red to blue'" (106-7). Could reality be improved by improving language? Howard Jackson – I mean Womanward Jilldaughter! – proposes "politically correct" vocabulary as a real instance of such a project, prone to undermining itself with its "excesses" (61). Or could some Big Bad invent an über-malevolent reality? The same essay tackles Orwell's notorious Newspeak. Now, Mrs Doe-erton didn't raise no fool – the swift dismissal of linguistic determinism via elision with metaphysical nominalism is a red (threat!) herring. What Jackson's really fishing for is whether linguistic regulation could ever be a viable instrument for the state administration of social consciousness. No, he concludes, quite plausibly. The officials of Orwell's authoritarian-totalitarian Party would find it tough to "stand outside the process in order to fashion the language" (63), let alone calculate how subjugated citizens would "consciously reflect about the words they use" (61). What bureaucracy could cope with something so volatile and copious? Too many moles, too few whacks. Jackson even uncovers several places where Orwell's usage departs – or mutates – from his own invented norms.

Still, we musn't be complacent about centralised linguistic engineering. Newspeak-style manipulation of social reality may be a tall order, but states do alter social reality, often unpredictably, through linguistic-legislative initiatives. Suzanne Romaine's superb finale focuses on revitalised languages – Hebrew, Irish,

Cornish, Hawaiian. Revitalisation, it turns out, demands invention aplenty. Romaine points out by-the-by that English, French and other languages "whose legitimacy is taken for granted" (213) have been profoundly shaped by deliberate interventions, born of "desire for prominent ideological symbols of shared identity, purpose, and nationhood" (ibid.).

Besides, it's not just language that is various and ever-changing. So is state power – and new forms come constantly into being. Could the elven tongues tell us more about elven sociopolitical organisation – and its autarchic, ecologically-responsive vibe – than all those unpersuasive trappings of patriarchal feudalism? I enjoyed Weiner/Marshall's bit about sound symbolism or phonaesthesia – the notion that certain sounds have "recognisable semantic associations due to recurrent appearance in words of similar meaning" (103) – and the question of pleasure in the relationship between sound and sense. To an elf or a philologist (like Tolkien), such associations could also include superseded semantic systems, plus the reasons they shifted, vanished – the movements of peoples; the judgments of the powerful; conflict and assimilation; prosperity; persecution; disaster; diaspora; division; colonisation; abandonment; war. Aesthetic aversion (such as to a piece of political correctness as "excess" (q.v.)) and aesthetic pleasure always contain such historical sediment. But for Tolkien's immortal elves, it is an information so rich, clear and complete that aesthetic response become inseparable from judgement as though in a public forum. Feeling becomes a mode of reasoning.

Elves aren't Party draftsmen (as in "linguistic legislation"), nor engineers (as in "linguistic engineering"), nor construction workers (as in "socially-constructed"), but craftsmen and artists, celebrants and mourners. They don't redesign their language, they elfvolve it. Could a RL analogue be imagined? Luckily that's a tall, pointy-eared order. Still, picture a state financially incentivising the general market of cultural production – via Digital Rights Management, automated statistical textual analyses, clickwrap-contracting and billions of micro-transactions, via any number of arm's-length agencies and private sector partners – to align language use with some desired template. Where authoritarian statecraft falls short of perfecting totalitarianism, liberal statecraft could conceivably succeed.

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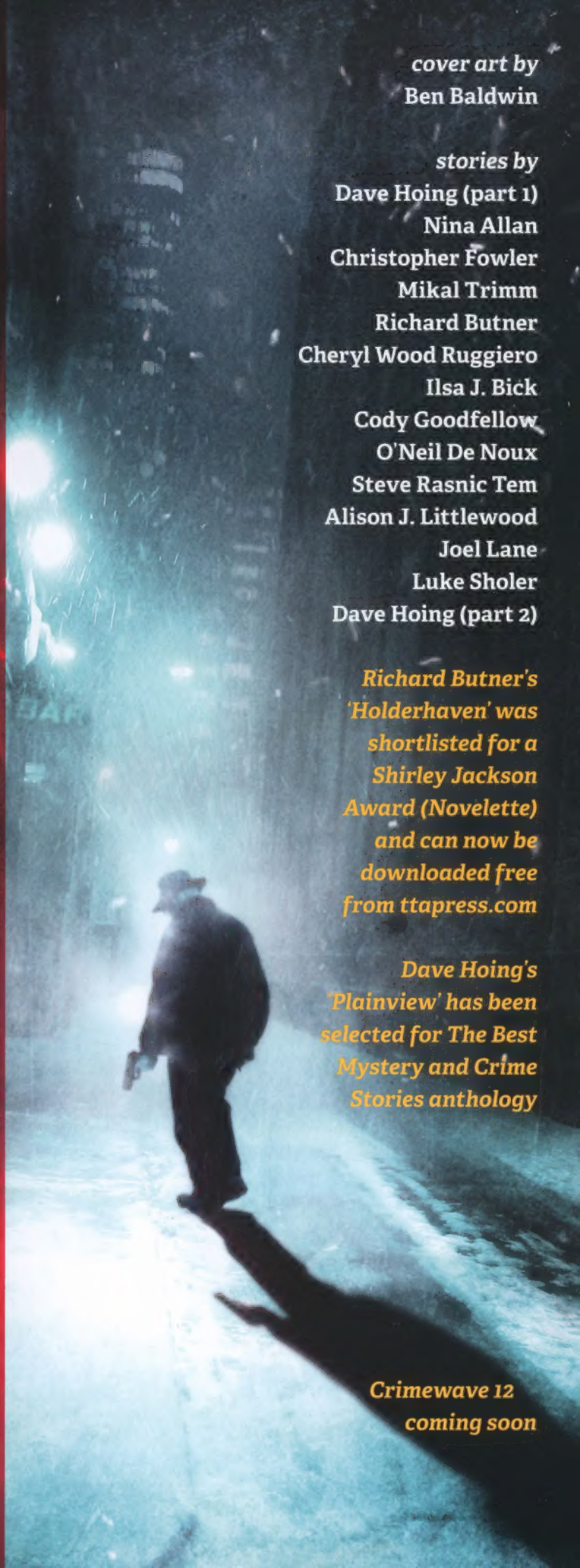
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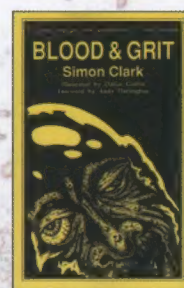
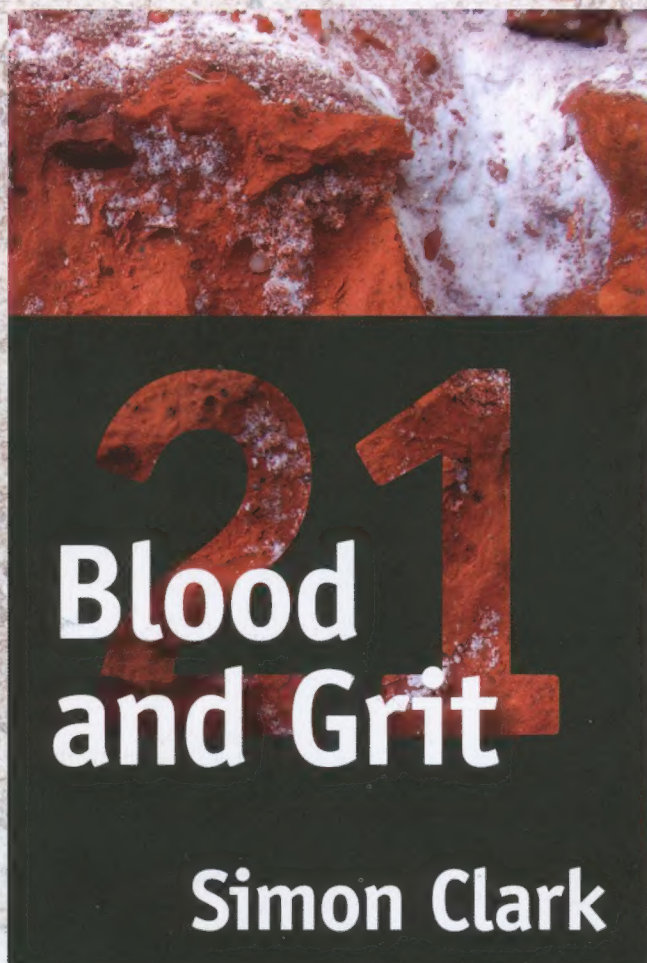
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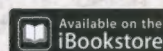
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